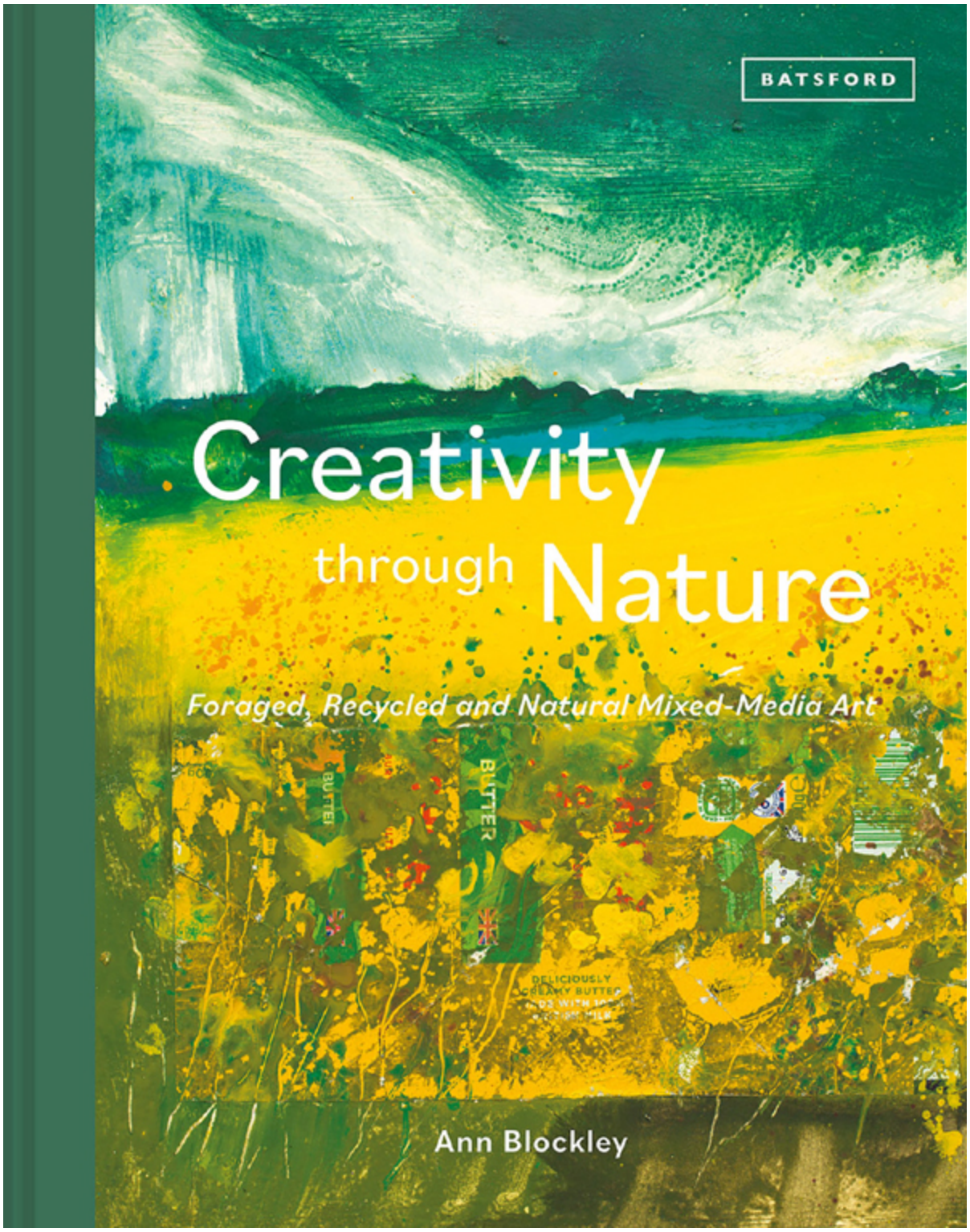
BATSFORD

Creativity through Nature

Foraged, Recycled and Natural Mixed-Media Art

Ann Blockley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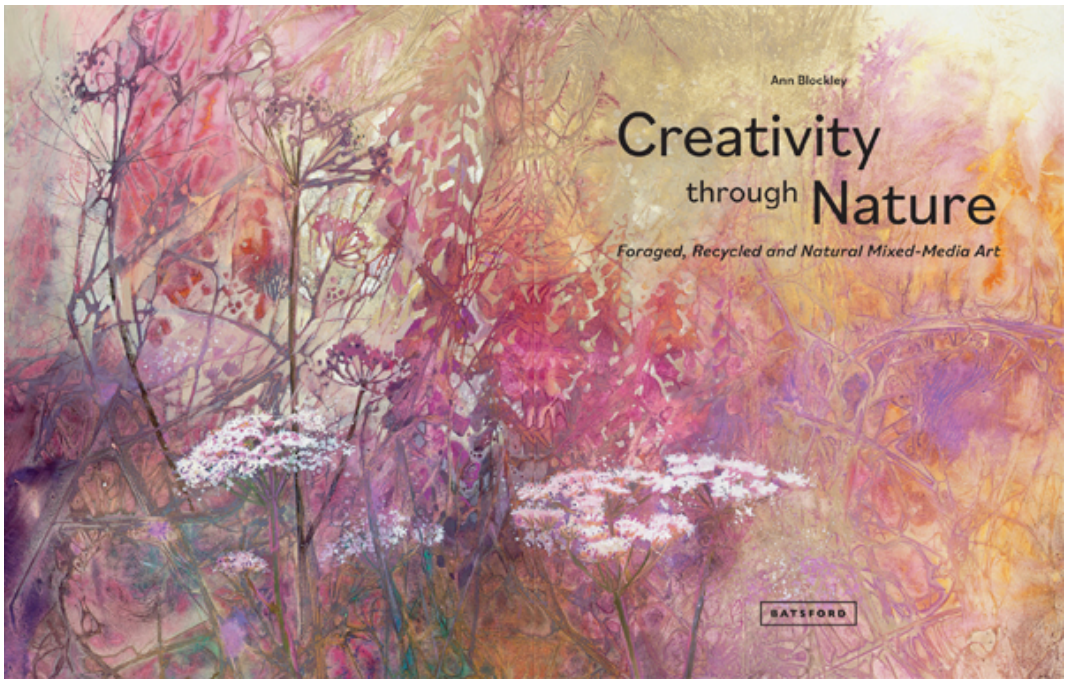

Foxgloves and Cow Parsley *Watercolour*.

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In the Pink *Watercolour and ink collage*.

Foreword

We are increasingly disconnected from nature. We live on a planet that is under threat due to our own casual disregard for and disrespect towards it. We largely live in an urban, technology-based world, governed by rules and boundaries. Our need for economic progress drives us to want 'more' of everything, to have our goods 'ready-made', 'convenient' and' fast'. 'Art' has become a commodity – another interior-design trapping, an increasingly product-based activity and cog in the commercial rat race. Bombarded with imagery on the internet and social media, we have become stressed and bewildered by choice, competitive, hierarchal and in danger of losing sight of 'Art for art's sake'. We 'share, compare and despair' but are more isolated in this time of sophisticated communication than ever before. Is it any wonder that so many artists struggle to be creative when we live under such pressure, in such an unnatural way – as we quickly destroy the environment and eco–system, whose complexity and beauty we are a part of?

I am writing this at a defining moment in our time. I have not left the house for weeks and outside the Covid 19 pandemic is raging. It is scary. When the idea for this book was conceived, we had no concept of what lay ahead. I was concerned at the time about the crisis facing the health and future of our planet and the fact that, in most of the world, 21st-century living was beneficial neither to nature nor to nourishing a creative life. I wanted to comment on this with a view to how artists might reassess their contribution, values and priorities. Little did I know when I started, that many of the discussions I planned would become so

painfully pertinent to the situation that has developed. I did not know that many people would be told not to leave their houses; only able to communicate to each other through technology. However, during this period, positive changes have emerged. Changes in how artists are connecting with and supporting each other. There are acts of kindness, giving and sharing. There is a rediscovery of the earth beneath our feet. We are finding beauty in the everyday, ‘making do and mend’, going back to living in more sustainable ways, being creative and valuing nature, family and friends above wealth and productivity. I do not know, as I write this, what the world will be like when this book is published. My hope is that by the time you read this, we will be back to a ‘new normal’ but continuing to build on some of the lessons we started to relearn during this time.

July 2020

Blackberry Hedgerow *Watercolour and ink using hedgerow materials for mark-making*.

Teasels and Rosehips *Watercolour and inks, using wild rose leaves for mark-making*.

Introduction

This book explores whether an immersion in nature might help stimulate or re-engage artists in their creative process and help alleviate negative artist's blocks. It also looks at a variety of more organic and possibly more sustainable practices and mediums. Nature is not simply a picturesque subject; it is wild, even uncomfortable, but also has the potential to rejuvenate and fill our senses with wonder and delight. Being connected with nature extends far beyond the visual, and the book is not only concerned with finding different ways to record nature but also how to 'be' in a more natural way. It is not just about using watercolour; it is a holistic approach to encourage an art-making lifestyle that flows from a first-hand knowledge of the natural world, using mediums that are more friendly to that world. We will explore how drawing closer to our primal roots can be beneficial to ourselves, our art and our environment.

I want to delve into a darker, earthier kind of nature and establish more grounded connections with place. I have included many of my usual subjects such as hedgerows, landscapes and woodlands but, as the planet succumbs to increasingly frightening events, it felt appropriate to confront the very elements of nature too. We will adventure into the rituals, myths and magic that are becoming alien to us and invoke enchantment, a childish outlook or a beginner's mind. Let's feel the dirt under our fingernails; go back in time to our foraging and gathering heritage. Let the guiding principle be to enjoy the *process* and intrinsic values of being creative within all areas of our lives, rather than concentrating on an end *product*. We will explore how we can create in alternative ways with a particular emphasis on

found materials, reducing, reusing and recycling. Ephemeral and conceptual ways of working will also be looked at.

If we are mindful of what is happening in nature, it is likely to 'give back' to us in immeasurable ways, nurturing our creativity, inspiring us and breathing back 'flow' when our artistic stream runs dry.

'Deep in the forest there's an unexpected clearing that can be reached only by someone who has lost his way.'

– Tomas Tranströmer

The story of a book unfolds

Quite recently, I thought I had reached the end of the road as an artist. I questioned whether I wanted to continue painting and was certain that I had written my final book. I felt that I had nothing left to say. But gradually, the bud of an idea formed and grew until my thinking blossomed. Some thoughts flourished while others withered, but once the main concept properly took root, within just two seasons my world had turned. I was excited to recognize being at the start of an adventure that was personally life-changing and realized that my ideas might resonate with other artists. This book is the fruit of my discoveries and my way of spreading these fertile seeds of thought about a different way to be an artist in the modern world. I have shared stories about how I have coped with and reacted to fears and situations that have affected my own creativity. I hope this personal chronicle will give you positive thoughts for moving forward with your own creative narrative. If the book is too autobiographical, I make no apologies. The only thing that I am truly an expert in is being myself and only by speaking from this personal position could there be strength and authenticity behind my words.

A few years ago, I had breast cancer. It is a common disease but it was a devastating time and I felt as though I was no longer ‘me’. I remember returning from hospital one desperate day and sitting under our magnolia tree. As I looked around our magical garden, I felt the warm sun on my back, heard the blackbird singing his tune and watched the flowers starting to unfurl. I remember thinking, ‘Life goes on. Nature continues and – as a part of nature – so can I.’ I proceeded to hurl myself into a creative frenzy with my book *Experimental Landscapes* about to be published and an exhibition to launch it. I forged forwards with my plans and was thrilled by their success. However, when the excitement abated, I crashed. I felt depleted and the following years were an emotional rollercoaster. I stayed in my studio, determined to push through, obsessing about my health, becoming disconnected from my garden, the countryside and other artists. I hated working outside. It was uncomfortable and I never produced anything ‘worthwhile’. I was uncertain of what path to follow in my work and worried that if I changed direction, I would lose my followers – you. I was not unfamiliar with artist’s block – I had been through times of self-doubt before – but this time I felt completely caged in by . . . what? Fear of failure? Fear of matching up to previous success? I decided to research the subject and could relate to all I read. I was profoundly good at having artist’s block – I even had ‘A Block’ in my name! I wondered whether I could write about the subject using my personal experiences as an example.

The Old Apple Tree *Handmade paint using raw pigment on photographic collage*.

My creativity was still too blocked to proceed but now that I had something to focus on I relaxed and thought more clearly. How ungrateful I had become when I was lucky to be alive. I resolved to be more thankful, enjoy each day and work more outside again. During this 'back to nature' period, I received an unexpected email from my publisher: 'Had I thought about doing a book on a nature theme?' This is my favourite subject but I was still attached to my artist's block! I was not sure I wanted to let go of it until I saw that the two ideas were connected. I recalled my day under the

magnolia tree and realized that I was now happier and more creative since I had engaged with nature again and actively confronted my creative gremlins. I decided to link the two ideas: Creativity through nature.

In harmony with nature

While I was obsessing about the future of my art there was an abrupt escalation of media stories about the future of our struggling planet: frightening news about the relentless output of plastic into the oceans. I was catapulted into an awareness of the issues hitting the headlines. Although the warnings had been there before, I had paid scant attention to the litany of apocalyptic catastrophes that are now uncomfortably familiar: global warming, glaciers melting, deserts spreading, forests shrinking, toxic waste, wildlife extinction, wildfires and floods, storms and plague. All this with the sting in the tail – that much of it has probably been caused by human consumerism and global capitalist systems. We have reduced the Earth's wild places, squeezed out native species and put pressure on natural resources.

The human race has entered the twilight of its long-held assumptions. The realization has suddenly gathered momentum that the relentless march of 'progress' is not without cost. The health of humanity relies on a healthy environment, not on economic growth – or at least we need to find a balance. In an era dazzled by digital wizardry we lost touch with the magic of the natural world and became alienated from the Nature that we are a fundamental part of. For convenience, I use the phrase 'connect with nature' throughout this book but, of course, we are part of nature ourselves. We got into the habit of thinking that humans reign supreme and that the rest of the planet is primarily a resource for our use. Our arrogance has backfired.

But what does this have to do with artists? Facing such a magnitude of problems, it is tempting to take a 'what's the point?' attitude. What chance does the individual have to help create change? Most of us have no skills to make sense of the mess and, as we feel the consequences, it is hard not

to blame others or feel despondent. However, my belief is that art and culture have positive roles to play and I proceeded with what I felt was the right thing to do. I assessed how and what I was using in my art practice to see if I could work in a more sustainable or, at least, more responsible way, which also felt appropriate for an artist immersed in nature themes. I have never been politically or environmentally active but I urgently wanted to make a contribution, however small, to raising awareness about the crisis facing us. All I was qualified to do was take charge of how I behaved within the art world and tell anyone that would listen, in the hope that it would encourage them to follow suit and add an extra focus to creative life at a difficult time on Earth.

The bigger message for my book had revealed itself at last. Connecting with nature helps us creatively but we need to give back by acting in a much more responsible way. Spend more time in nature and less on buying goods. The more I live in harmony with nature, as closely as is realistically possible in the 21st century, the more I feel my troubles fall away, my creativity flows and time slows down, leaving no room for dark clouds of thought. My love of nature, and being aware of its capacity for healing, has helped me through tough times – physically, mentally and creatively. I hope my stories will resonate with you to offer hope and inspiration for your own natural and creative future.

‘Words and images can change minds, hearts, even the course of history. Their makers shape the stories people carry through their lives, unearth old ones and breathe them back to life, add new twists, point to unexpected endings.’

– *From* Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto *by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine*

The artist’s role

From East to West; from Aboriginal art to Art Nouveau; the implied message from many groups of artists has been to celebrate and cherish the Earth. The ‘Romantics’ were a group of nineteenth-century English poets who meditated on the complex relationships between humankind and nature. It was a response to the disconnection from nature precipitated by industrialization; for William Wordsworth and his followers, poetry was a route to reconnect with it. This great tradition of nature in art extends back to painted imagery on the walls of prehistoric caves, utilizing available materials; intimately connecting to the environment. Art–making is a fundamental primeval impulse and some of these first images were celebrations of natural cycles that reinforced our sense of wholeness. Ancient cultures held chaos together through music, dance, story-telling and art. Today we have television, theatre and social media. Most of us watch rather than participate and neglect our primal bond with nature. I believe it is time to revisit some of the old ways of imagination and communication.

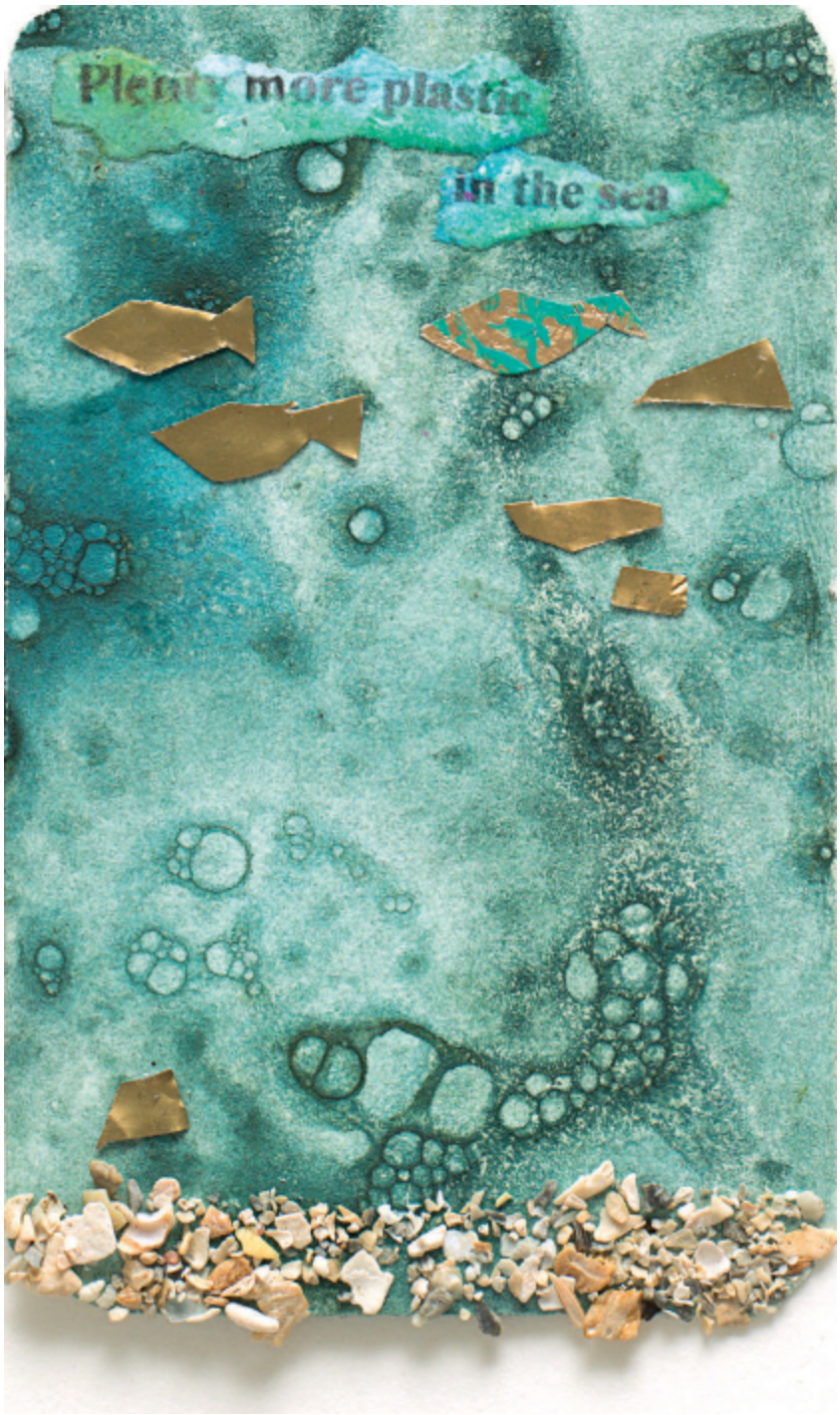
Artists can create cultural metamorphosis. We transmit messages that reflect society. A piece of art has the ability to have an impact on people and potentially change their behaviour. I use the term ‘art’ as a threading together of its

many manifestations and genres, ignoring labels of art or craft and including painters, musicians, poets and potters, creators and makers, dreamers and weavers. Cultural products do not just mirror the prevailing culture – they also help shape it. The creative world has the power to send messages to the forefront of conversations that evoke curiosity and concern; the message that nature is worth paying attention to and needs our care and respect.

Environmental artists have long been sending out such messages using recycled or natural materials to celebrate their connection with nature or highlight environmental issues. The British artist and environmentalist Andy Goldsworthy makes ephemeral outdoor installations using sticks, stones, coloured leaves, flowers and other natural materials to reflect on nature and the passage of time. In contemporary art we are seeing cutting-edge technology being employed to engage with forces such as wind, water and sunlight. Digital forests and chunks of ice from a melting glacier have been displayed as sculpture. The list grows, and as the public have, in general, become more environmentally conscious, the audience for this kind of art is expanding. You may think that these 'alternative' styles of expression do not have any relevance to your own practice, and I am not suggesting that we shift rock or glacier. However, in our own, perhaps more domestic ways, we can still express powerful messages. We can be harbingers of hope to help lift the spirits of our global community. Art is a personal response but it is also universal. If we each take small pieces of action they might, like a communal patchwork made from scraps, build something bigger that is also beautiful. As each individual creates, shares and reassesses, the greater force of 'the collective consciousness' becomes a reality and we can reaffirm it by living in ways that reflect this. Our contribution is to keep our creativity healthy and grounded, not just for ourselves,

but so that we are better placed to spread awareness about what is becoming the modern *un*-natural world.

The Sea is Drowning *Collage incorporating waste materials and coral*.



Plenty More Plastic in the Sea *Collage, incorporating broken shells and plastic, on watercolour textured with detergent*.

Creative roots

If I was going to raise my voice effectively about the value of nature, and sow messages about how it can help our connection with the Earth, each other *and* our creativity, I needed to weed out some of my own limiting negative beliefs and fears; prune and cut away the rubbish. Why was I still listening to what I called my gremlins – that negative inner voice that queries *every* decision? Why was I still clinging to my artist's block – a virulent weed choking the flowers? It all had to go. I was beating myself up for not being productive but, like nature, creativity is seasonal, with times of fecundity often followed by dormant periods. Energy and ideas are like poppy seeds that lie underground waiting for the right conditions to sprout. Plants often take a 'gap year' to recover from disease and stress. Sometimes, we just need a rest. Of course, when the garden's purpose is to produce food and your art needs to generate income, it is more complicated. But if something dies in the garden there is no choice but to cut your losses and diversify. I am a perfectionist, but I recognized how debilitating this can be. I stopped trying to achieve 100 per cent and followed the lessons of the garden, where there is both success and failure.

> *'Be wild; that is how to clear the river. The river does not dry up, we block it. If we want to allow it its freedom, we have to allow our ideational lives to be let loose, to stream, letting anything come, initially censoring nothing. That is creative life.'*
>
> *Clarissa Pinkola Estés*, Women Who Run With the Wolves

As these thoughts took root, it occurred to me that most children do not have artist's block – they are not afraid to make a mark because they have no expectations and truly practise the idea of art for arts' sake. As we grow older, we become afraid, for multiple reasons, that what we do will

not be ‘good enough’. And when we create something we like, the goalpost just gets higher, raising the disappointment potential. This can eventually cause creative paralysis. To tackle this, we have to stop trying to be ‘good’ and just turn up to play; like children do. I gave myself permission to follow a wide variety of ideas and replaced my negative inner gremlins with a fun-loving, more tolerant inner playmate. I needed to follow my own advice and start to do some playful, experiments again – albeit with an underlying serious theme – using nature as the focus.

Butterflies *By Oscar, aged 8*.

Nature is good for you

'… there is another way to live, on terms of greater intimacy with the woods and land – slower, more deliberate and benign: a quiet assertion of greenwood values.'

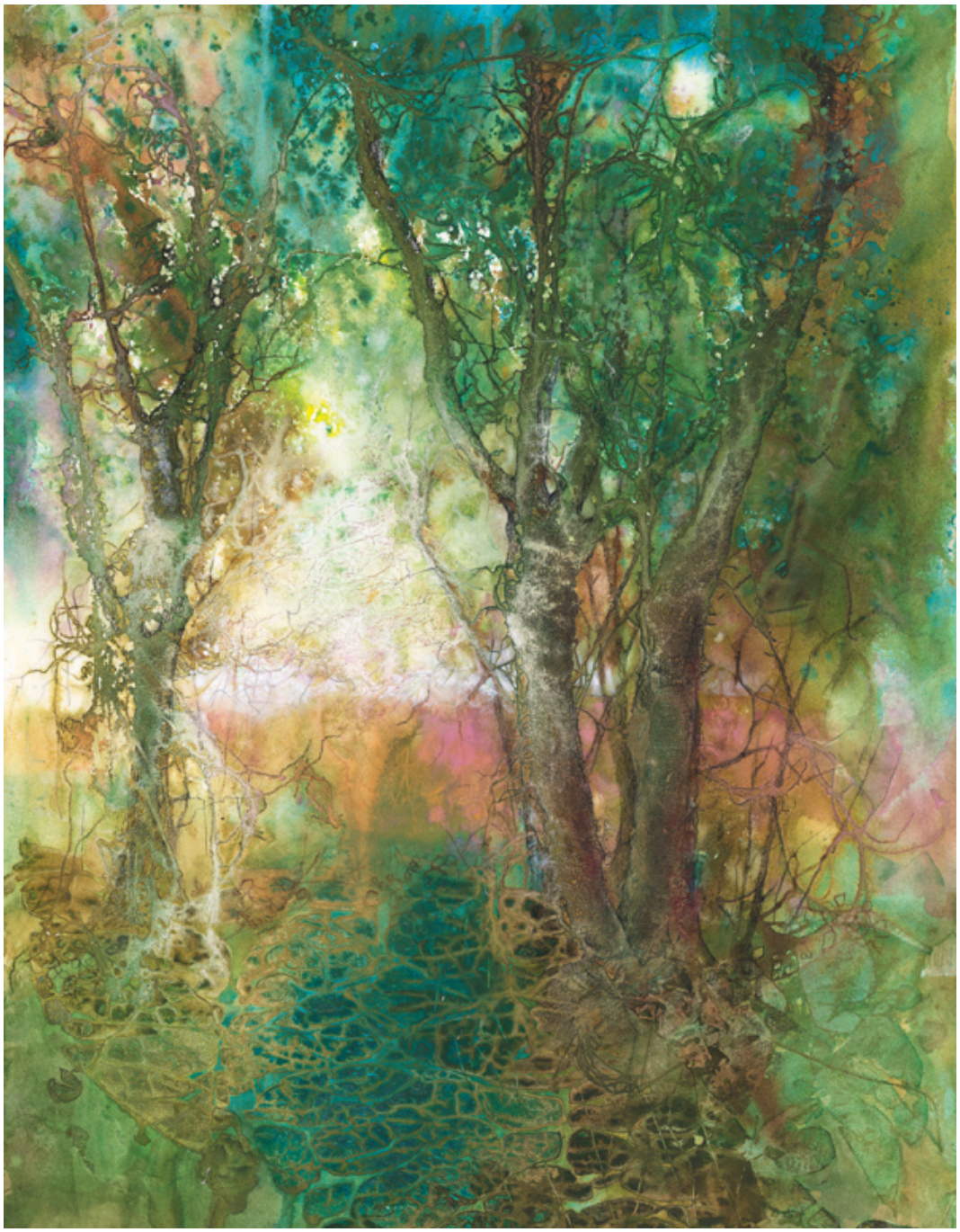
– *Roger Deakin*, Wildwood

In my mission to explore different ways in which nature might affect creativity, I spent months painting, drawing and connecting with the great outdoors and using more natural art practices. Fresh air and muddy hands help me feel more grounded and I am convinced that nature played a huge role in rejuvenating and inspiring me to re-engage with my creativity. I have no doubt that it could facilitate other artists in similar ways. The concept of 'Nature is good for you' is not ground-breaking but I felt I had a contribution to make to this theory through my own example. It has been substantiated by many nature-based cultures, spiritual practices, psychologists, doctors and scientists, and I explored what some of the experts were saying before adding my own voice. I wanted to be sure of the facts before proceeding with the book in more fun and practical ways.

My research unleashed an avalanche of information and evidence to back up my claim. I made endless notes, most of which were unused or distilled. The good news was that current thinking seems to mostly agree: being in nature appears to have a profound impact on our physical and mental health. Reports claim that nature impacts our nervous system as well as brain function; that it is mood-enhancing leading to increased energy; helps to reduce anxiety, stress and depression; lowers blood pressure, cortisol levels and heart rate; increases our attention

capacity, memory, productivity and ability to connect with other people. Being outside may help you experience a shift in how you view time, which helps you to feel less pressured. Other experiments claim that nature can help us approach moral dilemmas more ethically, make us more trusting, generous and helpful to each other – all mediated by the increase in our own positive emotion elicited by natural beauty.

Scientifically proven benefits to spending time outside are legion. Vitamin D from sunlight helps keep you physically healthy but can also elevate mood. Natural light regulates your body's melatonin production, which helps you to sleep and wake feeling rejuvenated. Evidence also indicates that breathing in phytoncides (the smells from trees) may help to combat cancer and viruses. The slow, deep breathing encouraged by fresh air helps to calm us and can also help regulate levels of serotonin to promote feelings of well-being. This feel-good factor also comes from the ground, as harmless bacteria found in soil are a natural antidepressant that may boost your serotonin metabolism. Finally, the negative-ion-rich oxygen found in nature, especially in places like waterfalls, has a relaxing effect on the body. The claims are widespread and enormous, with each factor potentially having an impact on our levels of creativity, imagination and problem-solving. How amazing to think that we may gain all these extra benefits by simply walking outside to draw a tree!



The Magic Tree *Watercolour*.

Green Tree *Mixed mediums on paper*.

The urban forest

The evidence that nature is therapeutic is encouraging, especially as it is a free resource that many of us can easily access. More people now live in urban areas than in rural ones, but location should not be a barrier to nature connection. Nature is not just for country bumpkins. For example, London has over 8 million trees, and many millions of other plants, insects and animals, which makes the city the world's largest urban forest according to one definition. And even if you live in a skyscraper, basement or

office, nature can be called in with greenery. In a concrete courtyard you can still see the clouds or sun, the moon and the stars. Just looking out of a window on to a natural scene, at something green, or even an image from nature has been shown to soothe us, relieve stress and even encourage quicker recovery after illness or operations.

You can argue that camaraderie or simply taking time away from phones, screens and other technology, whether you are in nature or not, is beneficial. Similarly, physical activity indoors and other forms of stress relief or attention restoration, such as sleep or meditation, can show comparative benefits; but the wider picture indicates that being in nature augments these impacts with gains over and above what exercise or unplugging from technology might produce. Technology is designed to constantly distract and stimulate, pulling for our attention, and many scientists believe our brains were not made for this kind of information bombardment; that it can lead to mental fatigue and burnout. The constant attention demands of 21st-century living drain us of our resources to think deeply or focus; using your phone, in whatever way, affects brain function and causes reductions in cognitive resources. When you overstretch your brain by multi-tasking but then go for a gadget-free walk, the part of the brain that is involved with creativity, problem-solving and a sense of well-being recovers. Neuroscientists are using cutting-edge technology and tools to prove what artists and writers have been telling us for years. It seems that when my mother insisted that ‘fresh air is good for you’, she was right all along.

Go outside and play

It is simply common sense that if you are constantly indoors within four walls, looking at a rectangular screen, hopping

in and out of a vehicle to take you to another square box where you stare at a different screen or fill your trolley with stuff you don't really need, you're missing out on something incredible – the real world. Nature is an antidote to what ails us at a time when processed foods, long hours at a desk and decreased human interaction with the advent of social media are all wreaking havoc on our bodies, minds and relationships. I am going to stick my neck out here with a non-scientific, non-academic statement: Time in nature is not a luxury; it's essential to our physical, emotional and mental well-being. As our creative flow is directly linked with these it seems to me to be a 'no-brainer'. 'Go outside and play.'

Even in small doses, nature is a potent elixir: current thinking is that twenty minutes a day outside is all you may need to allow your brain to refresh and boost your energy levels, which helps you to start thinking more creatively. However, it has also been suggested that the longer the better, and that although looking at a plant may help, an occasional visit to a wild place for a longer period of time is more life-enhancing. If you struggle with depression, it is hard to reach your full creative potential, but spending time in nature can again help with improving your mood and overall mental well-being.

Most research agrees that we live in a society that has become increasingly distanced from nature and its life-giving benefits. Human connection with nature is widely believed to be in decline, with a cultural shift away from it towards a modern lifestyle of increased virtual and indoor recreation. Many children, especially, seem to be suffering from this nature deficit. Our nature vocabulary is disappearing as children know the names of more Pokémon characters than wildlife species. Some researchers estimate that humans spend up to 90 per cent of their lives indoors,

with more and more time spent online. The balance between technology and nature is out of kilter. These findings are a cause for concern because they indicate that we are missing out on the physical and psychological benefits from engagement with nature. There is also a theory that as our disconnection increases, the less responsibility we feel to protect our natural environment.

Snowdrops in the Wood *Watercolour collage*.

Forest bathing and mindfulness

I have always gone down to the woods to play without realizing that this is now fashionable. In Japan and South Korea 'forest bathing', or '*shinrin yoku*', is commonly promoted as a therapeutic activity to help industrialized cultures slow down, reconnect and reduce stress through the 'bathing' of all five senses. 'Forest' can mean any green space such as a park or garden, where you can smell the wet grass, feel the breeze on your skin, listen to bird song,

taste and breathe the fresh air. Forest bathing is related to mindfulness, a kind of meditation within nature. None of these ideas are new, having been used throughout history, especially in Eastern cultures. Meditation, mindfulness and forest bathing may now be 'buzzwords', but ignore the labels, switch off, find some inner silence and luxuriate in the moment.

There is a network of activity in our brains that triggers imagination. This tends to get activated when we're engaged in gentle, undemanding activities such as a walk in the woods. This helps to explain why people often have 'eureka' moments during quiet activities – like sitting under an apple tree. If you suffer from artist's block or are just having a bad day it would be better to take a break outside than continue struggling indoors. Shakespeare was on to something when the magical transformations within his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* took place in the woods. Today, it may feel that the magic has flown away when we are never far from a noisy car, aeroplane or radio. Most of us do not have access to actual wilderness – so the trick is to lower expectations and try not to focus on irritations any more than you would an annoying fly. Concentrate instead on the natural sounds, scents, sights and sensations of birds and breeze. Block the clamour and noise of mental clutter to sharpen your senses and bring clarity to your thinking and seeing. Our senses dictate how we interact with the world, and a key to creative inspiration lies in consciously taking the time to acknowledge what is around us. Take your shoes off and feel the sand or wet grass beneath your feet, absorb the light and feel fresh air enter your nose and rush into your veins. It is lovely – really!

On the other hand, if the very thought of that makes you feel cold and damp, go out and buy some wellies and waterproofs! If you cannot see beyond the mud of the

countryside and the feeling that there is nothing to inspire you, it's probably because you are not properly equipped. Hop on a bike or don your walking boots and look through some binoculars to reveal a whole new world of creatures, insects and nature's magic.

'Solitude fosters thought, since the only conversation possible is with oneself.'

– *Sylvain Tesson*, Consolations of the Forest

Last Light *Watercolour, including the use of ferns from site to make monoprints*.

Brambly Hedge 1 **and** ***Brambly Hedge 2*** *I spent a year visiting a specific local hedgerow and painting a series of different interpretations of its ever-*

changing atmosphere and detail. These two paintings include the use of bramble leaves from the hedgerow to make monoprints.

The slow movement

We talk about 'spending' time as if it is a currency, and so it is – the most valuable one of all in my opinion, as it can never be replaced. Perhaps that is why we feel under pressure to speed up, get things done in the fastest time possible in order to cope with our increasingly hectic schedules. Why do we need to be so busy? To earn more? For some it is to pay for food and other essentials, but for others it is to get the extra money for the holiday they 'need' because they are so stressed by their daily lives! Time is a precious gift and as such should be savoured, not rushed through. Try slowing down and doing less; you may achieve more in the end by quietly opening the door to your awareness of serendipity, synchronicity and enchantment.

If that sounds woolly and silly when you are bogged down with work, children and appointments, take a deep breath and think how small things might be changed. For example, when we are out and about, in a waiting room, on a train, in a queue, we tend to reach for our mobile phones. If we resist this temptation and look around, we may notice things in a new way. Use those valuable moments that are normally spent in bored limbo to engage your senses instead. The unremarkable might become something that holds the potential for new ideas. It requires attention, concentration and curiosity, with an opening of your mind to possibilities rather than assumed knowledge and preconceived perceptions.

When I was in Asia, watching masters at work, I found it inspiring to see their entire process made slowly, with attention to detail; from the arrangement of aesthetically

pleasing materials to the preparation and process itself. Their demonstrations were striking examples of the art of Zen, where an immersion in the moment and appreciation of the beauty of each brushstroke was more important than a race towards the finishing line. Although time is valuable, when we slow down to take a more measured and mindful approach, we waste less of it because everything slows down with us – our stress levels, our heartbeat. My advice? Rather than rushing to finish a painting, spend a whole year working on one idea. Sketch, play, experiment … enjoy.

Collaborate and connect

In my nature quest to shift my artist's block and feel more content, I had slowed down, spent time in forests, given myself permission to try all kinds of new creative 'treats' and was facing many of the fears that had been clawing me backwards. When I read Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way* I recognized one of my worst 'gremlins'. In the final chapter she asks, 'Are you prepared to be alone in your journey?' It hit me with force that, creatively, I did not want to always self-isolate in my studio. I am more comfortable with privacy but feel the need to connect and engage more deeply with other artists, as well as with nature – because we all *are* nature. We are alike in many ways and being more open to each other can expand our opportunities for sharing, collaboration and interconnection. It is hard to grow creatively without a community. We may need solitude to do focused work, but feedback, encouragement and mutual learning can help us blossom.

Perhaps we could learn from nature again, with its underground internet of fungi, whose threads link the roots of different plants, communicate, help each other and sabotage any unwelcome 'nasties'. Plants talk to each other

and about 90 per cent of them find these arrangements mutually beneficial. The beauty of nature lies in its variety and interconnectedness. Each diverse but separate part contributes to the ecosystem, which is made stronger by such complexity. Today, in spite of social media and the internet, many of us are increasingly disconnected, competitive and view each other with suspicion, envy or jealousy. It is a nurturing thing, in these times of crisis, to re-establish ourselves in the web of interdependent relationships with the Earth and each other.

Fagus Sylvatica II* by Buckmaster-French** *Emma Buckmaster and Janet French are fellow members of The Arborealist movement. They collaborate to create unique etchings printed on to paper made from the tree's own leaves*. ***Fagus Sylvatica II *(58 × 72cm) is a limited-edition etching of a winter beech tree at Holkham Hall in North Norfolk, printed on paper made from beech leaves collected in the autumn*.

Beech Wood Fall *Beech leaves were gathered from Lady Park Wood and used to create monoprints. This was part of The Arborealist's visit the wood with renowned ecologist Dr George Peterken OBE in a project to connect art with science. The image is featured in* ***Art Meets Ecology****, a book about the project, published by Sansom and Co*.

I began to reach out to other artists and joined The Arborealist movement. We share a passion for trees and collaborate on projects based on specific woodlands, ancient trees and national parks. To compile this book, I also contacted a number of other amazing artists who connect with nature and whose ethos feels compatible with my own. Our insecurities can easily prevent us from sharing, but the recent pandemic has highlighted how important it is for all

of us to connect with each other. This could be to other artists or craftspeople that you meet online or within a local art group. It could equally be a nurturing circle of local friends, gardeners, musicians, poets or cooks. A bee-keeping friend, for example, showed me how to make face cream and soap using beeswax and natural products. This fuelled my desire to work with natural art materials. An active and busy open mind is important for creativity – one thought cross-pollinates another.

Connecting across the world

A few months before starting this book, I was invited to Asia with a group of eight British artists to participate in an art and sketching exchange. It was a wonderful opportunity to connect and join in a dialogue with another culture. I was very apprehensive of travelling so far on my own, spending time with strangers with little information about what was expected. I urgently needed to confront my inner gremlins, who once again had leapt into action before the trip with great delight, to tell me it was probably a really bad idea! I ignored this negative commentary and concentrated on preparations that would make me feel more confident. I experimented with new ways to sketch, fine-tuned my art kit and made sure I had plenty of mosquito spray and sunscreen! I had to make a positive leap of faith and take risks if I was going to move forward.

Whilst away, I had a milestone birthday. On my big day, we visited incredible scenery. I chose to paint a huge waterfall, reached by climbing hundreds of steps carrying all my art stuff. At the top, there was only a tiny, slippery platform to view the dramatic cascade. I had chosen a massive sheet of paper, double the size of any I had used before. I fixed it to the wet ground with rocks. It filled the whole space, leaving

virtually no room to move. A flimsy fence was all that was between me and the depths of a thundering pool below. As the waterfall showered the paper, I began to pour and splash my inks and watercolours. My heart was racing, but I had never felt so connected and exhilarated with painting before. When rain threatened, I had to reluctantly stop and a volunteer helped me carry my work down to base camp, holding it like washing on a line. The wet paint streamed down the paper and loosened up my marks even further! There was magic in the air that day and I felt something change. When I came home, I stepped confidently into a new phase of my life.

By Poet's Mountain *The painting of this awe-inspiring mountain was made on my return home, from sketches, words and memory*.

Connecting with nature

'We constantly refer back to the natural world to try and discover who we are. Nature is the most potent source of metaphors to describe and explain our behaviours and feelings.'

– *Richard Mabey*, Nature Cure

I began to immerse myself more thoroughly in nature – painting, drawing, photographing, and experimenting with new materials either outdoors or in my studio. I gave myself no rules. Above all, the aim was to absorb atmosphere and feed off raw creativity. I wanted to connect with nature by making records of it purely for intrinsic values; the sheer pleasure of doing it. The added bonus was that it would inevitably inform, refuel and ignite my thinking. Connecting with nature can be a healthy, mindful, Zen activity while also being research and inspiration for art ideas. In this chapter, I will look at different ways of recording, including the more practical aspects. The underlying theme is that of simply 'being' in your natural surroundings and enjoying the process.

These explorations also helped me to reassess and possibly revise my working practice. I have explored sketching and painting on location, working *en plein air* to create finished pieces or making reference studies for later interpretations indoors. I used found materials from a particular place to help establish a relationship with it, either outside or in. I worked in the studio using nature subjects for direct reference or used photography. I wrote nature notes and poetry outside, which helped me to focus on immediate details and atmosphere rather than later relying on memory. The methods you use to record and make

connections with nature are a personal choice. As my own confidence grew, I found myself experimenting with a whole range of new ideas, which nature had helped me to unlock. I have written some ‘stories’ about my experiences and hope that these will inspire you to have your own nature adventures.

Hogweed and That Distant Blue *Watercolour using materials from place*.

Turning over a new leaf – a daily nature exercise

Any day of the year can be a new beginning. Forget traditional ideas of ‘New Year’ – how about today? Many artists keep a nature journal and this kind of regular ritual of recording, whether with words or images, gives each day a moment of meaning and purpose, opening your eyes to the beauty and possibilities of small things. For this project, I chose the theme of a leaf, so that each day I would turn over a new leaf of my sketchbook and so create a daily celebration that I am alive, creative and connected. This kind of exercise encourages sharper levels of observation, looking for new ways to view familiar surroundings without taking them for granted. I began by aiming to find at least one interesting leaf a day to record, but that soon became one a week or a few each week or month, depending on my schedule. Strict rules cry out to be broken, which can create a feeling of failure, so my eventual aim was to simply show up often enough to fill the leaves of my book.

My overactive mind always races ahead with further ideas before I even make a start. At this stage, I imagined that when the leafy yearbook was assembled I might bind its cover with leaf skeletons and gold ‘leaf’ to acknowledge the richness of the ritual and beauty of the ordinary. Elaborating a simple pleasure into a bigger project like this can be debilitating and stop you from beginning, so I put my grander ideas on hold and concentrated on taking baby steps. I focused on using straightforward, quick photography to record leaves that grabbed my attention, at home or away.

A regular creative exercise like this is a great way to help you discover your creative self. You could do loose sketches

or paint instead of taking photographs, but ‘finished’ work is less likely to freely or quickly give you clues to the identity of this elusive artist’s voice. Go for themes that are really important to you – not ones you feel ‘ought’ to enthuse you. Developing habits or routines helps give structure to your creative cycle, as long as you think of it as a treat, not a chore.

Creative play through the seasons

It can be easy to feel uninspired by or jaded with the same repetitive daily walk. I try to stay alert to fresh ideas for keeping motivated and mindful. We have looked at the idea of practising regular creative rituals to add a bit of ceremony or meaning to everyday life (see here). Creativity needs to be practised almost like a religion, to be honoured and cherished. It can also be something that not only exercises your imagination and observation skills but is fun. It occurred to me that a pack of playing cards has 52 cards with four suits, which mirrors the number of weeks in a year and the four seasons. I had a scruffy set that was no longer fit for purpose so I recycled it as a series of miniature surfaces for recording nature on over 52 weeks. I contemplated ways to make this into a creative observation and design game. My initial idea was to match each suit to a season and theme. Every week you would pick a card for the current season and look for something on excursions to match the number. It could be five spots on a butterfly wing or three shades of green in a tree, not necessarily an amount of similar subjects. The card would be altered in some way by painting, collaging or stitching over it, but traces of the original surface could be left to shine through.

I spent so long making decisions about potential rules and themes that it stopped me from making a start! So I

ruthlessly abandoned most options and settled for using 52 cards to make weekly experiments on. The only restrictions were to use materials relevant to the moment such as re-purposing current paintings, photographs, drawings, scavenged rubbish, haiku poems and foraged treasures. I allowed myself to act spontaneously without negative judgements, filling each card with something observed that week, then recorded in an experimental way. I made associations between colours, textures, marks, shapes, words and subjects so that they became mini mood boards. It was enlightening and loosened up my creative thinking. I found myself wanting to continue this kind of work but on a bigger scale.

Nine of the cards from the *52 Week Project* *Materials used include: Verdigris on copper scrap, teabags, lace, packaging materials, shells, dried leaves, flat pebbles, gold top from bottle, sea glass, sand, earth, handmade papers*.

A country diary for the 21st century

During my first year at art college in the 1980s, I lived in town for the first time and craved small signs of nature. On home visits to my family in the country, I appreciated the countryside afresh, keeping a record of all my rural findings with the idea of creating a nature diary through the seasons. I hadn't heard of anyone else doing this. The following week we had a visitor to the college, giving a talk on a book about to be published called *Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* – a facsimile of a nature journal made by the speaker's aunt, Edith Holden. We did not know then, but it was about to hit the best-seller list. I was ridiculously put out and did not go ahead with my own version because it might look as if I was 'copying' – I am sure a lot of us have had these moments! Do not allow what I now recognize as synchronicity to stop you from following ideas and dreams. If someone else has beaten you to something, it simply confirms what a good idea it is.

Keeping a nature diary with images, words or a combination of both, is a fantastic way of keeping connected with your world. In the 'stay at home' period of 2020, close-up nature details became even more precious and I began to record them again, through flower paintings and rubbings of different leaves (see here). During this period, I noticed other artists also recording humble weeds and wildflowers in their different styles. There was a strong feeling and understanding in the ether that the small things, close to home, were important and connected all of us. Influenced by the unusual 'domestic' nature of the situation, where home had become the epicentre of our world again, I revisited some of the homely activities of embroidery and sewing that my mother had taught me as a child and included these in a nature journal. It was a nod to the Edwardian lady; but in a style that expanded on the methods and ideas I had been exploring in my '52 weeks' project (see here).

Frottage (rubbing) of buttercup leaf on thin paper (see here).

Daisy, Daisy *Egg tempera on hot-pressed paper*.

3 April 2020:

***Still in 'lockdown' – we are allowed out once a day for exercise. My daily walk is now even more precious. The cowslips are bright and lush under the hedge and I hear the cuckoo calling – nature carrying on regardless. I notice yellow dandelions shining like small suns in a stormy sky of grass. I love their serrated leaf shapes and plan an image with similar toothed edges. I also spy some black woven fabric half-buried in the ground – the farmer uses this to wrap up hay bales. I hate plastic littering the countryside so I pull it out for collage material. The frayed edges remind me of grass. The black is an ideal background for my image – not a romanticized view, but a comment on shadowed times*.**

Cowslips *Ink and egg tempera*.

Dandelion in the Grass *Mixed-media collage*.

Nature collections

Even when I am unable to go outside, I surround myself indoors with nature findings, collected in the countryside. I have kept a ‘nature table’ since childhood and always reserve a pocket for my discoveries. These might include feathers, pebbles, seed-heads, seashells, bits of fallen

lichen or a knobbly twig. I also keep an envelope in the back of a notebook in which to collect leaves, flowers and other flat finds for pressing or printing with. Nature collections are multi-purpose. They can be decorative, keep you connected with a place, used as subjects or utilized as natural art materials. I often arrange my treasures into groups of 'like-minded' objects that share characteristics. For example, I place lacy lichen with a fragile skeleton leaf and fragment of coral. It is like a series of still lives to keep the inside in tune with the seasons outside.

You can find different ways of making displays: fill vintage china bowls or willow baskets; place tiny objects in the small sections of a print rack on the wall. You can leave your treasures loose so they can be moved around, or create a more permanent installation. For example, seashells, sea urchins, pieces of blue sea glass or pebbles can be positioned into geometric mandala patterns. There are different types of mandala, but in simple terms they are a spiritual symbol of deeper connection with the self and the universe, made for purposes such as aiding meditation or healing. Whatever your beliefs, making a mandala from natural finds like flowers, leaves, berries or different-coloured sands is a fun and therapeutic form of creativity.

The colours and textures in this collection of 'goodies' inspired a painting that hints at rock pools, beach and barnacles. Some of nature's recurring patterns – the networks of branch-like designs called fractals – can be seen in seaweeds, ferns, corals, lichens, fossils and marks made by sea in sand. Similar feathery fractals have been created within the artwork by peeling away thin paper placed over thick paint.

Honesty is the Best Policy *I rescued this torn painted tissue paper from the bin. The textures echo those in peeling tree bark. When I layered the semi-translucent pieces, I was reminded of the sandwiched layers of dried honesty seed-heads. Art made from organic materials can be ephemeral, depending on how it is created. This transience offers reflections about time, reminding us that life is short and change inevitable*.

‘I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather.’

– Andy Goldsworthy

Wabi sabi and nature's abstracts

Wabi sabi is a quiet ancient wisdom, commonly understood in Japanese culture but not easily pinned down into a rigid definition. It is an intuitive, almost spiritual response to the beauty of humble everyday life and objects; the appreciation and acceptance of the imperfect and ephemeral that reflect the true nature of life. The focus is not just on the material thing itself but on how we perceive it and the quiet personal reaction to how this makes each of us feel. It seems to share something of the Buddhist philosophy in the acceptance of 'what is' and the power of each current passing moment. *Wabi sabi* is intimately entwined with our relationship with the rhythms of the Earth and its seasons, respecting its flow and impermanent transient nature to help us focus on 'the now' with simple, slow, natural living. It teaches us to value being frugal and having less.

Wabi sabi is not strictly about *what* you see but *how* you see it. Sometimes it is linked with memory. For example, when I see daisies in the lawn of my garden, my instinct is not to get the lawnmower out. Instead, I experience a warm memory of being a child, threading daisy chains. Small things like the silvery flutter of midges in the woodland at dusk or the earthy taste of a freshly dug potato create similar responses. Looking for visual examples of *wabi sabi* in nature can help you to pay respectful attention to what you see and feel. Like a kind of mindfulness, the *wabi sabi* search involves slowing down to observe small details. As our senses dictate how we interact with the world, we should consciously take time to acknowledge what is around us, with a sense of wonder, instead of

rushing through a blurred world. It is the key to creative inspiration.

'*Sabi*' is to do with the passage of time demonstrated physically in objects, as a reminder of our own past and mortality. Re-creating the feel of it in art seems more authentic to me when made from enjoyable marks and textures that were accidental or serendipitous. The intangible layers of meaning and memory behind *wabi sabi* can be represented through the layering of materials. It lends itself to abstract or decorative representations that echo the textures themselves. When connecting with nature *wabi sabi* style, look for how ageing and the seasons alter things: look for patina, fading, antiquity, weathering, discolouration, disintegration, stains, peeling layers and gleam rather than shine. They are reminders that life is not perfect and to accept the imperfections in your art.

Woven Hedge 1 *Pencil and pen drawing*.

Woven Hedge 2 *I tore holes in this drawing to echo the idea of the gaps and spaces in the woven hedge*.

Making unique interpretations

Artists can work and gather reference in whatever way they like. There is no optimal method. It is a case of discovering what suits you in both practical and personal ways; ways that mean you actually make these required connections with nature’s subjects and moods rather than simply

thinking about it. For example, the notions that photographic processes are cheating or that to be a ‘proper’ artist you have to work from life and sketch or draw in a particular way are outdated and limiting barriers. The traditional route of drawing in sketchbooks suits many artists and can be convenient, but other than tiny, easy-to-carry notebooks, I usually use loose paper. This gives flexibility to vary shape or size and allows for further studio work. The act of engaging with your nature subject is more important than the tool you use to discover that key ingredient that makes something sing for you personally. There is also little point copying someone else’s painting or even photograph, except in extreme circumstances or to practise and learn a skill. The result is a shadow without meaning. Any form of art is ideally based on personal experience or imagination – only then can you dream freely and stimulate your unique interpreting skills.

Often it is not the subject as a ‘scene’ that is interesting but some abstract quality within it. My ‘woven hedge’ series is based on observations of a hedge near my home. The process of ‘laying’ a hedge involves bending branches over and weaving them into almost geometric structures, which are then softened by new growth. It is nature modified by Man in a useful way and although the subject is perhaps unglamorous, in my eyes the abstract structural patterns and gaps between each element are a fascinating theme.

Woven Hedge 3 *I manipulated a photograph and painted and drew on top, adding an impression of snowdrops that had grown there earlier in the year*.

Taking nature indoors

I like to live as close to nature as possible. To be fully creative, I believe you need to *live* creatively with a fully holistic approach. My husband is an old-fashioned forager, and gathers nuts and berries from the hedgerow. Many people's hunter-gatherer instincts have been lost as they become reliant on the artificial environment of the supermarket and virtual shopping. We try to reduce this disconnection and reliance on packaged foods by having an allotment and growing our own vegetables. Well, I suppose I ought to be clear here: my husband digs, fertilizes, hoes, sows, weeds and waters, and I turn up with a basket to pick and eat the raspberries. As well as being good for body and soul and providing us with fruit and vegetables, allotments

contain rich pickings for artists as well. It is one of the few places where I enjoy the complement of geometric structures placed amongst nature. There are sheds and greenhouses, beanpoles, garden spades, even the curved structures of the polytunnel. These are great subjects, but it is also a good exercise to paint close-up still lives of produce, looking at it purely as organic, abstract shapes and patterns, almost like painting a miniature landscape of texture and shapes. Detailed examination reveals a wealth of colour. Carrots are not simply orange and a beetroot can contain elements of turquoise, green, browns, madders, as well as rich purples and magentas.

Chris's Giant Beetroot **(circumference 38.5cm)** *Gouache and beetroot ink with collage on 'waste' mountboard taken from a mount aperture*.

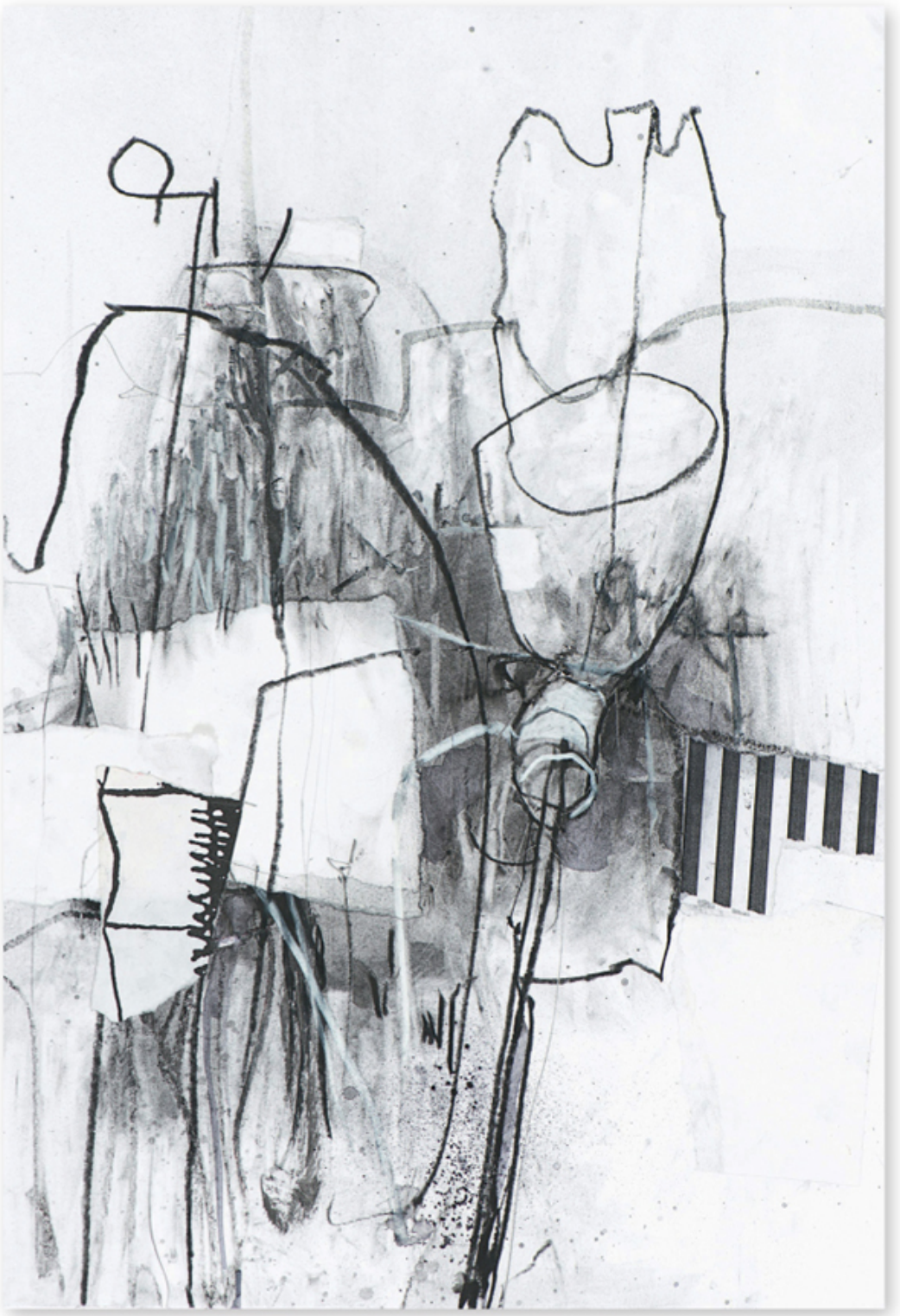
My husband and his chum, Chris, are keen rivals in the vegetable department, vying with each other as to who can produce the biggest and the best. One evening, after supper with our friend, Chris produced the most enormous beetroot, as big as a turnip! Its dark, withered leaves were ragged and lacy with holes, contrasting the solid root with

its subtle mottled colourings. I asked if I could borrow it to work from in my studio. I painted it on a collaged background of the newspaper it was lying on, complete with weather forecast. I liked the story behind it; a simple subject with a wealth of meaning. Not just the value of sharing homegrown organic food but of connecting with friends. Painting everyday subjects like this is rewarding in the same way as keeping a diary. It teaches you how to see the world through refreshed eyes and feeds into other work. When you cannot get out into the garden, you can always bring it indoors.

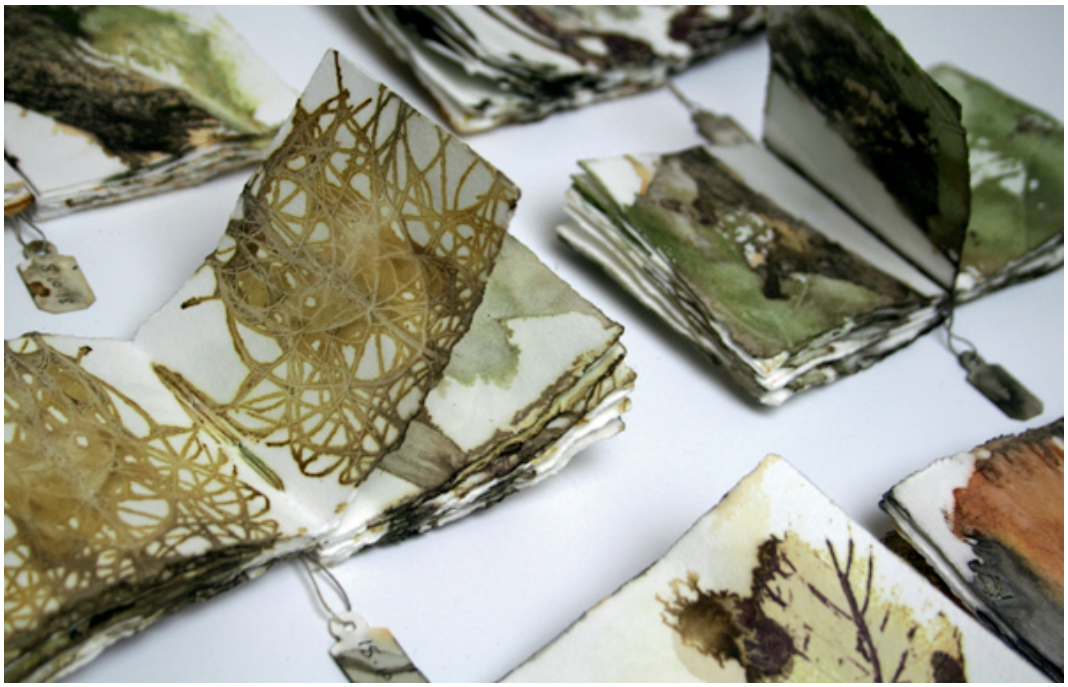
Recording the allotment

The beetroot painting overleaf was the beginning of an allotment project; recording the vegetables as they were gathered through the year, either sketched in situ or taken indoors to paint in loose and experimental ways. At the same time, I began to take note of how other artists were taking inspiration from allotments and the different personal ways that these experiences were being recorded. On my return from the vegetable plot one day, I happened to look on social media and a loose, generous sketch, celebrating abstract shapes, leapt out to greet me. The artist, Karen Stamper, had also been working on a series of drawings in her allotment: synchronicity at work. Karen Stamper is an artist and teacher known for her use of found materials in collage. She draws avidly and has experimental ideas for taking the fear away from using sketchbooks. Her sketches are often made *en plein air* but sometimes taken from drawings in the studio where she often rips up work and collages other pieces on top. In her allotment series, she was not concerned with simply making ‘nice drawings’ but with the scratchy, physical process of her explorations. ‘I

need to draw, collect, layer and absorb the places I visit until they are embedded in my artwork and in me.’



Allotments 2 **by Karen Stamper** *Black and white mixed media (60 × 46cm)*.



Selection of the 52 books by Alice Fox from her project 'Plot 105: 52 Weeks', which employed botanical contact printing using plants from the allotment.

Alice Fox has a process-led practice, based on personal engagement with landscape and with sustainability at its heart. She is fascinated by the detail of organic things and her work celebrates her experiences in the natural world using found and gathered natural fibres and materials. In her project 'Plot 105: 52 Weeks', the allotment became the source of materials and she explored the potential of what grew there, both planted and wild. Her plot was run as a normal allotment with crops grown for food, but plants were also explored and used for ink-making, natural dyeing, printing, cordage-making and more. A small bound blank book was made each week for a year. Pages were printed or marked using plant materials gathered from the plot that week using botanical contact printing. Alice also made another small weekly series: 'Postcards from Plot 105'. These included the layering of hand-written text and sketches, which were overprinted with plants in the same

way as for ‘52 weeks’, creating interesting variations each time.

Working *en plein air*

Many artists love working outdoors. There are clear advantages to being closer to nature but the hands-on experience also facilitates a more accurate representation of the true colours and atmosphere of a place. It encourages an immediacy of expression and emotion that can go beyond creating merely a visual description of the world, to demonstrate the artist’s own experience and participation in it. There is a bonding between the subject and the artist that creates an interconnected sense of belonging. Studio painters often use solely photographic references, which can frequently distort the tones and colours and reduce three-dimensional reality into an enclosed rectangle. Photographed subjects can become distant and hazy with time. My late artist father, John Blockley, painted all his early work outside but later discovered that sketching on the spot, followed by indoor studio painting, helped him to be more experimental with his interpretations.

For years, I have had a love/hate relationship with working *en plein air*. I am passionate about being outside, immersed in nature. I feel I absorb it through all my senses – and that was the problem! I found it hard to switch off from external factors relating mostly to weather and physical discomfort. I am by nature messy and chaotic and I often forgot something. My main bugbear was having to carry a heavy bag. However, once I decided to stop fighting what I perceived as problems and get more organized, I relaxed and began to enjoy it. I now travel more lightly, having jettisoned a lot of non-essential kit. I use more found materials and tools taken from site and work at a size I can

easily carry. I only take a small amount of emergency water as it can often be found nearby. I limit myself to a few colours and often mix them on the paper itself. The most important change is that I no longer feeI that I ‘ought’ to work outside, but I can if I want to and, gradually, I have found that I do.

***Branches* by John Blockley** *Pencil drawing made* en plein air.

Tree Roots *I sat on a carpet of fallen leaves in the wood to paint and draw using earthy leaf mould, ink made from shaggy inkcap mushrooms, pond water, charcoal from a bonfire, sticks and the feather from a wood pigeon*.

Connecting materials with place – bulrush pond

There are some ponds in a local wood that I often visit to sketch and paint throughout the year. One early winter day the pond was still frozen when I arrived. I had to crack the ice near the water's edge to get some painting water. I also had to dig under the frozen surface of the bank to get to the oozing, luscious yellow clay underneath the icy crust that I planned to use as raw pigment. I had noticed that the light on the bulrush reeds around and in the water was illuminating them to a golden colour, which was very similar to the colour of the clay in the ground. It also echoed the yellowing leaves of bramble where I sat. This seemed a lovely, synchronistic parallel and I wanted to make use of this thought in my sketch by using the clay material from the pond as a paint medium. It was very cold, so I had to work quickly and quite crudely but that seemed to capture the raw nature of the weather.

On another occasion, the pond had thawed, so I applied some clay again then soaked the paper on the surface of the water to loosen things up. It felt appropriate to work on a smooth, wet surface to echo the nature of the subject and I used a slippery homemade ink on top of this, which could easily be scraped through with a stiff piece of bulrush stalk in order to represent itself.

Yellow clay from the pond forms a base coat.

Pond painting in progress.

Scraping through thick ink to describe bulrush stems.

The Bulrush Pond En plein air *sketch using pond clay and water with homemade ink*.

Mindful sketching – willow

The river Knee Brook near my studio twists and winds through meadows. The willows that line it echo its meanderings with their twisting, contorted silhouettes. One March day, before the leaves had disguised its shape, I ventured outdoors to draw one of these willow trees from different angles. I drew both back and front as each were interesting formations with branches reaching to the ground as if to steady themselves. In the first drawing, I smeared damp mud on to dry paper very loosely in the shape of the trunk and branches then, using a piece of decayed wood as a tool, I scraped lines and marks to describe the heavily fissured textures of the bark. Working on my second version, viewed from the other side, I began by soaking the paper in the muddy water beneath the tree, which matched the colour of the willow bark. Clumps of sandy earth flocculated on the damp page and I used the textures as a starting point for this sketch. I drew into it using some willow charcoal from my kit bag, as this seemed a fitting material.

Throughout these processes, I was conscious of working in a mindful way. I was alert to the contrasts of soft, moist mud with dry, brittle bark. I listened to the eddies of the rippling river and the wind hissing through the trees, making the old branches creak and sigh. I used my fingertips and the palms of my hands to smear and dab the mud or wipe the wet surface. My fingernails scraped and scratched the ‘paint’ and I took note of how this made me feel. Looking for chunks of wood to use as tools made me notice the details in the willow bark; the fascinating patterns made by tiny insects burrowing through. The wet mud under the tree was printed with geometric arrow shapes that seemed to point and say, ‘Take note, just look at all this enchantment.’ I realized the ‘arrows’ were the puddled footprints of visiting ducks and this made me smile.

Soaking paper in the flooded river.

Smeared mud sketch scraped through with willow stick.

Another sketch in situ.

Willow Sketch 2 *Willow charcoal, gouache, puddle mud and gravel, scratched through with willow bark*.

Seizing the day – bluebell wood

Going down to the bluebell woods to play is an annual treat. Some years, due to the list of ‘more important’ things to do, I have missed out by leaving it too late. I now make it a priority because, with nature, you have to seize the day. When you are busy, it is also easy to convince yourself that a photo and sketchy scribble will suffice, but if you put aside this information for too long, you can find yourself feeling removed from the subject. This spring, I made a series of colour beginnings on the spot. As I painted, I consciously explored the notion of ‘process’ not ‘product’, really losing myself in the beauty of the moment, absorbing the scent of the bluebells, the sound and sight of woodpecker, pheasant and occasional deer. I was not too worried about using the logical ‘left side’ of my brain: colour matching to a precise shade of bluebell. I was aware that bluebells are not a true blue and that there is a lot of green in them. I knew that a mixture of cobalt blue with a touch of quinacridone magenta or cobalt violet captures the ‘real’ flower colour quite well but, on this occasion, I did not want to be constrained by botanical actuality or accuracy. Within my experiments, I also played with shades of turquoise, cerulean and French ultramarine. I hardly ventured into the realms of green as my mind was focused on the concept of ‘blue’. I just wanted to enjoy the flow and let the experience transmit and translate like osmosis, from the reality on to the paper. I lost myself in the tangled designs of the trees and branches that framed the swathes of colour. Picking my way through prickly brambles, branches and tangled stems of old man’s beard and honeysuckle had made me realize that the romantic cliché of a bluebell wood is not necessarily accurate. There are thorns, stinging nettles and undergrowth waiting to trip you up. You have to stoop under and scramble over branches and logs. It is not all sweet and pretty – it’s uninhibited nature.

Work in progress. It is absorbing and soothing to watch the beauty of light and shadows play across your paper, casting soft drifts of ephemeral pattern.

Bluebell Wood *The ragged edges and coarse surface of this handmade Indian Khadi paper (see here) seem in keeping with the 'back to nature' theme of this painting trip, during which I sat on the rough ground to paint, in direct contact with the subject itself*.

Bluebells and Tangles *I started this painting in the wood and worked into it at home. I was conscious of not making it too 'finished' and losing the spontaneous energy that had arisen from painting in situ*.

From sketch to painting – meadow

There is a meadow 'set aside' for wildflowers on a ridgeway that looks towards the church next to my studio. It is a favourite view. I went up there to paint one summer day and I found myself automatically painting this scene in a representational way. Sometimes, when you feel uncomfortable outside, it is hard to switch off and be creative. On this occasion, I can remember feeling hot under a glaring sun, and was cross and frustrated while painting my sketch. When I had finished, I continued to sit and enjoy the pleasures of being amongst the wildflowers, soaking up the lilac colour of the scabious and the warm

ochres of the wheat fields beyond. Once I slowed down and relaxed, I realized that it was the intricacy of the intimate close-ups combined with merely a sense of distance that interested me – not ‘the view’. I headed home, clutching a handful of the grasses I had sat amongst, and set to work immediately, using the grasses to create monoprint beginnings (see here). I painted wildflowers on top of this initial stage, combining representational detail with the more abstracted patterns created by the foraged stalks of grass. The sketch had not been wasted as I used the colours chosen for it as a starting point for the painting, and the process of making it had allowed my thinking to develop in its own time, in an organic way.

Meadow Dance *I used gouache for the paint sketch (left) and subsequent work (right). This opaque medium helped me to work into and over my grass monoprint. It also helped capture the dry, dusty nature of the hot day*.

A Bird in the Meadow *This painting was developed out of a monoprint made using grasses from a nearby meadow. Later, I worked on top using opaque gouache to cover up some sections and develop others. Loose impressions of birds were added at the end*.

Nature prints and rubbings

One way to keep a strong connection with your nature subject is to collect natural materials from the site and use them to make impressions or monoprints. For example, flat leaves, grasses, flowers, bark, seed-heads, can all be used in different ways either in situ or taken back to the studio and incorporated into artwork. Please see here for guidance

on the Countryside Code and be careful what and how much you forage. To make an abstracted beginning, you can place objects, a leaf for instance, on top of paper then pour paint over it, cover with waste paper, newspaper or tissue and weight down until dry. The paint seeps underneath the object and exciting abstracted prints can form, which may be left or developed with further painting. To increase control and make a more defined image there is a kind of nature relief printing, which was first used by medieval illustrators of herbals. You apply paint or ink to leaves and flowers and place them face down on paper. Firmly rub them and lift off to reveal the print. If you have an interesting flat shape, such as a fern, you could also use it as a stencil. Lay it on the paper and spray paint over it. It does not need to be an aerosol. You can transfer watercolour or other water-based mediums into a reusable spray bottle.

Another option is to take nature rubbings from three-dimensional objects such as bark or rock, by placing thin paper over the textured surface and using a firm crayon, graphite or charcoal on its side. I use this method to frottage nature subjects using craft tissue paper (see the buttercup leaf, here). Pieces of translucent print can then be collaged on to another artwork in a way that blends comfortably with it.

A Blustery Day in the Hedge *Fallen leaves, collected from the hedge, were used to make monoprinted semi-abstracted marks within the paint, to create a dialogue with the hedgerow itself*.

A sense of place – waterfall

A sense of place in art emerges when you do not merely create a description of the world but invest something of yourself in it, through your experience and participation, to develop a feeling of being rooted in that place. I am no longer interested in painting completely representational views. I prefer to capture the atmosphere and character of a place or some emotion or memory attached to it. Mostly, I incorporate recognizable elements and adhere to logical or traditional perspectives, but I have often described my work as 'towards abstraction'. How you define your sense of a particular place is a personal response based on your relationship with it, as is the way in which you choose to gather that 'sense'. On a painting trip to the Derbyshire Dales, where I spent time as a child visiting grandparents, I

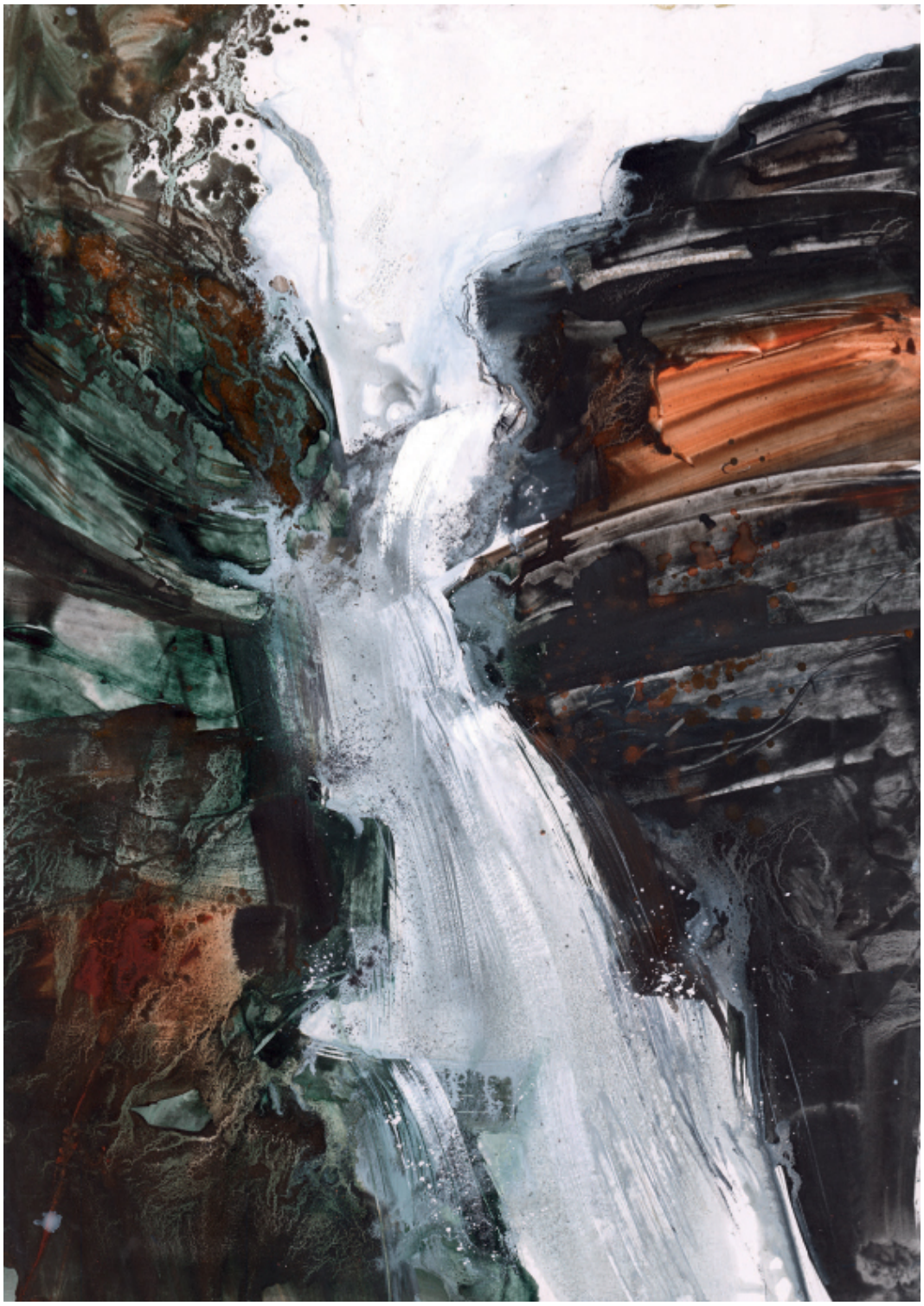
felt a strong bond with the area I was revisiting; a wooded valley with river, waterfalls and abandoned industrial mill buildings. It was late autumn and the beech trees had shed their leaves to bronze the floor. The colour was echoed in a large pond where a froth of rust-coloured algae had formed abstract patterns across the surface (see here).

Sketch 1 *I worked loosely to keep a sense of movement and energy and mainly used graphite and charcoal, which felt like an appropriate choice for the dramatic dark rocks of the waterfall*.

Sketch 2 *I tore up this version and reassembled it to increase the sense of the staggered rock-shape patterns*.

I felt a deep empathy with the damp, rich and rather brooding magic of the day and was excited by the contrast of stillness surrounding the neglected, ivy-softened mill buildings against a backdrop of waterfalls pounding nearby

through craggy, jutted shapes of wet black rocks. Colours were distilled to a simple palette: rusty orange, sullen green, black and white. An air of mystery and decay was compounded by the time of year. Having soaked in the atmosphere, I took many photographs but made drawings from a selection of these as soon as I was back indoors. Removed from the scene, I could concentrate on the ‘key’ points rather than be distracted by the plethora of other information, superfluous to my statement. When you paint from a photograph of nature you are doing just that: painting a photograph of nature, not nature itself. However, photography has a role as an information-gathering aid to the next stage of interpretation, just like a sketch.



Waterfall 1 *This was painted quickly, concentrating on applying slabs of dark ink and paint with a hint of rust colour into the zigzag shapes of the rock. I was aware of the negative patterns I created to represent falling water and pale sky*.

Waterfall 2 *In this version, I was keen to try out a mystery rusty red-coloured 'ingredient' that I had discovered on site (see here). I used it as part of a palette of limited paint colours and found that it could granulate and flow down the paper just like the water it was representing*.

The world beneath your feet – abstract detail

When I am out and about, I always scan the ground for interest. This stems from my background in natural history, whose details I often choose over the 'bigger picture'. The world beneath your feet often reveals wonderful abstract patterns and textures, whether it is the beach, woodland, mountain or moorland. On my Derbyshire trip (see here) I continued exploring and gathering information relevant to my impression of the essence of place. This time, I turned my attention to the wet carpet of coppery leaves and noticed a trickle of rust-coloured liquid oozing its way through them. Too excited to think of the potential dangers of an unknown substance (do not follow my example!) I scooped some into a water pot that I happened to be carrying and poured a sample on to a page of a small notebook. It immediately flocculated into a delicious texture. I had just been looking at some fallen sycamore leaves with black circular marks on them. There were also some with round holes, which I realized were where the spots had once been. At that moment a raindrop plopped on to my collected colour swatch and created a 'hole' in it. This juxtaposition of facts and happenings was a pleasing *wabi sabi* detail (see here).

I later learnt that the rusty substance was likely to be just that – full of iron oxide minerals. Perhaps this was linked to the previous use of the industrial buildings? I also found out that the red algae I had seen earlier (see here) is common in areas rich in iron. Writing this book has been a steep

learning curve and I also discovered that iron has potentially hazardous properties (see here). The artwork I made from these experiences incorporated some of the fallen leaves I had gathered, which were sufficiently dry to be stable and created dark, angular shapes that added to the design. I also used photographs of close-up details for reference, chosen for their abstract qualities rather than just the obvious 'view'.

My notebook with sample of the 'mystery found ingredient'.

The shapes and colours in this photograph helped inform subsequent artwork with its patterns of puddles, reflections, fallen leaves, mud and the debris beneath my feet.

Beneath My Feet *Homemade ink and site materials*.

Responsible art-making

'The source of my work is nature. I use it with respect and freedom. I use materials, ideas, movement and time to express a whole view of my art in the world.'

– Richard Long

So far, we have looked at ways to immerse ourselves in nature to enrich and expand our creativity. In this section, we will look at how we can not only connect to and be inspired by nature but make it part of the creative process itself. I am using the term 'responsible art-making' to encompass different ways to source art materials that may be more natural, less wasteful and more respectful of resources.

I have been looking at how we can be more selective and contemplative about what and how much we use. I have explored appropriately derived materials, stepped back in time with some traditional processes and reduced my use of the ready-made in favour of the handmade. I have recycled, found materials from nature, made paint, ink and paper and discovered new surfaces to work on. It is a huge field to explore, so I am just sharing the discoveries I have made so far and found most useful, fun or stimulating in this creative nature journey.

Some of the natural and handmade processes that I researched still required me to source man-made ingredients online. I am not a scientist or expert in the complexities of what makes a product environmentally friendly or sustainable but recognize that any product can potentially have a footprint and impact on the environment. However, I decided that over-analysis of what materials we

should or should not use might hamper creativity, and this book is also about freeing up creative flow and facilitating playfulness. My conclusion therefore is from an artist's perspective; that buying, using and wasting less 'stuff', repurposing and working with what nature provides where possible, is a satisfying and ecologically sensible compromise. I use man-made, less 'worthy' products if there is no practical alternative. The idea is about cutting down rather than cutting out in order to work naturally, but within the confines of 21st-century living. I have been weaving my way through a tangled wood of possibilities, looking for a careful path that offers a balanced approach towards creating art with sensibility; exploring ways that do not plunder but celebrate Earth's resources. Detailed practical advice is limited here by space, but please see here for further resources and information.

Hedgerow Hawthorn *Watercolour with marks made using hedgerow materials*.

An alternative approach to materials

The planet has only limited sources of oil left. And yet we are merrily continuing to produce plastic wrap, plastic pens, acrylic paints, mediums and PVA glue, which all come from fossil fuels. We vaguely think of art as environmentally neutral, but a lot of art materials eventually end up in landfill or the sea, which grinds it all into microscopic specks to be consumed by creatures. When we run out of oil, we will be forced to change our plastic habits, so we may as well begin now and stop some of this pollution.

I want to begin this section by updating an idea I have taught in previous books where I actively promoted, even introduced, the idea of using plastic wrap (clingfilm) as a way of creating marks and texture in wet watercolour. My revised thinking is that there are two choices: use less plastic wrap (clingfilm) by cleaning and reusing it; or find an alternative. Through trial and error, I have discovered a great substitute. Tissue paper, the kind used for art and craft, creates similar textures when crumpled and placed on top of damp watercolour although, unlike plastic, the tissue needs to be peeled away before the paint dries completely to avoid it sticking. You might argue that the tissue paper also has a footprint – but the bonus is that the by-product of the used, coloured tissue paper can be reused as collage material (see *Pink Supermoon*, here).

Of course, it is not fair to pick only on plastic wrap (clingfilm); there is a minefield of other high-impact products at the art shop. Everything we employ uses some kind of resource. Choosing to use a natural or synthetic material is a personal decision based on your own environment, life and goals. To make your choice, it may help to ask yourself questions: Is this product absolutely necessary and, if so, can you just use less? Is there an alternative that you can make or buy with fewer consequences? Buying too much of any material is the

leading cause of waste creation. It is better to buy conservatively and get only what you really need. Unused paints can dry up. If gouache or watercolours do dry in the tube you can cut the thin metal away, soak the paint and use it like pans of colour. If you have acquired materials that you are not going to use, organize an ‘arty party’ to do swaps with other artists or at open studios. Give away rather than throw away.

Bryony in the Hedge *Watercolour textures created with hedgerow materials, including bryony leaves*.

Woven Hedge *Woven and stitched scraps of watercolour on paper*.

Recycling artwork

It seems incredibly wasteful of paper to throw ‘failed’ paintings in the bin. They can often be used again in different ways. One option is to apply gesso or a ground to cover the picture and use it as a new and exciting surface to work on. Alternatively, I often crop paintings to distil them to a better composition and hoard the trimmed strips and sections, which often contain beautiful bits of texture or colour. One spring, on watching the birds busily nest-building, entwining all kinds of found materials together, I was inspired to weave some of my own scraps into a new artwork. I tore the edges of my saved pieces to keep it

looking organic and wove them together, creating a focal point with appropriately placed colours and marks. I used a little glue to keep everything in place but supplemented this by sewing through the woven papers, drawing lines with the sewing machine to resemble branches. You could combine bits of fabric and collage to take the idea further. For a different kind of painting surface, strips of unused white paper can be woven together for painting or drawing on. Nothing needs to be wasted.

Two For Joy *Mixed media with nest materials*.

I continued the nest theme, working into a different unfinished abstract painting and tearing around its dribbled marks to create a twiggy edge, including holes within the design to exaggerate the effect. I stuck small strips of painted paper on to this to emphasize the nest idea and painted in a pair of magpies. One is guarding its treasure trove of small gold pieces. I may weave some actual bits of a discarded nest into the holes around the edge before framing the artwork.

Reduce and reuse

Being frugal is a dirty concept in this world of commercial products. Advertising has engrained into our psyche the idea that buying something new will make us feel better. However, although a new pen will not, of course, make you *draw* better, creativity does not feed on self-denial. Artists are like children, and we need stimuli to stay enriched and feel a sense of abundance in order for our creativity to flow. The answer to this conundrum is to look to nature itself to lavish us with the treats and rewards we need to keep our artist souls healthy. Why have a spending spree at the art shop on stuff you do not really need?

Recycling materials reduces waste and our use of natural resources, so I set myself the fun, creative and practical challenge of using up what I already had in my home and studio, with no new purchases. When I ran out of white gouache I used household paint left over from decorating the ceiling. If I ran out of watercolour paper I applied gesso over old work and painted on top. I used up many of the manufactured products I had in my studio, rather than wasting them. I looked at how I might collage on different grounds made entirely or partially from recycled materials, including textiles.

Making a collage can involve using glues, which often contain chemicals. PVA glue is regarded as biodegradable because it eventually breaks down – but what is the impact of the end constituents on our environment? Trying to work more sustainably is complicated, and most of us can only work towards this idea rather than achieve it 100 per cent. So I do use PVA if I am sticking something heavy, but for lightweight collage pieces I use cellulose adhesive or even wallpaper paste. I have reduced my use of glue by venturing into the textile world and sewing collage pieces together.

Bird in the Frosty Hedge *I collaged the image of a small bird, puffed up against the cold, on to scraps of canvas and torn antique lace. I stencilled some white patterns using household paint. These ingredients suggested a frosted hedgerow I had seen from my window. I kept the frayed canvas edges and let the ragged lace dangle as they spoke of the seasons: disintegration and fragility*.

The poetry of patchwork

Just as a textile quilt or collage can be made by assembling pieces taken from a previous existence or purpose, an image can be given a new meaning or visual emphasis by taking it apart and reassembling it. I sometimes take inspiration from the idea of poetry. For example, the following two sentences broadly share the same sixteen words but in a different order: 1.`*The tangerine sky, bronzed leaves, bird song and spidery tangle of inky twigs were bewitching*.' 2. *'Leaves were bronzed birds, bewitching the tangle of tangerine twigs and sky with inky, spidery*

song.' The first version makes more immediate sense because the words are placed with the familiar phrasing of prose. But the second one, which has been jumbled up, has a more magical, ambiguous air. In a similar way, if we chop up and reposition pieces of a realistic painting, we can imbue it with mystery and poetry.

Leaves Were Bronzed Birds *Collage including torn and reassembled watercolour pieces*.

The alchemy of found materials

Reusing found materials is a form of alchemy where old materials can be transformed to create new, rich artworks. Using waste resources, which are often free or cheap, can release artists to be more experimental in their work. The artist Cas Holmes is a master of using her collections of found ephemera in intricately tactile textile statements.

Trained in fine art, her work combines mixed mediums with found materials and stitch, and she describes her process as 'painting with cloth'. Her work often contains underlying environmental messages as she is concerned with the ethical considerations of making and meaning. There is a dialogue with the materials used that informs the process, often having a connection to a particular place or time. The found materials, along with carefully chosen techniques, are in service to a particular statement or vision.

Little Birdies **by Cas Holmes** *Bird brooches made from an Ordnance Survey book, on hessian from* The Found Object in Textile Art *by Cas Holmes*.

'The personal biography of the found material can be used in new and original ways and their previous lives transformed to fit new purposes.'

– Cas Holmes

Picnic Time in the Meadow *Collage using printed and painted paper with textiles*.

Waste not, want not

My mother was full of old-fashioned expressions like ‘waste not, want not’, and there is a lot of truth in many of these phrases. In her post-war era, everything was reused, from butter wrappings to material scraps. We had a ‘rag bag’ of offcuts from clothes she made. She was always embroidering or sewing and I still have some of her patchwork pieces: vintage fabrics, from remembered dresses, sewn exquisitely with tiny stitches. Having hoarded them for years, I incorporated a few into a collage for this book. I assembled pieces of paintings, haberdashery and a

mint-coloured almond biscuit wrapper. I collated these, inspired by memories of long-ago picnics when we ate egg-and-cucumber sandwiches from plates with paper doilies on. The image is in reference to a nostalgic, bucolic, quintessentially English age, when the idea of visiting a café seemed like a sophisticated, futuristic dream. The piece torn out of an earlier dandelion clock watercolour seemed appropriate for use in this collage, being symbolic of the passage of time and the seeding and spreading of new ideas out of old ones. I stitched some long threads into the seed-head pompom to link the paper and textile elements of the design. Memories patched together like the tablecloth laid down in the meadow, amongst the threaded daisy chains of my past life.

Nature – away from home

When away from home, however near or far, it is great to gather background information about the culture and environment you are visiting as well as making visual records. All your facts and memories can be stitched together later – metaphorically or even physically. On a trip to Laos, in Southeast Asia we explored the jungle with a guide who shared his local knowledge about the natural surroundings. He pointed out a species of indigo plant growing amongst the bamboo. The leaves shone blue in the sunlight that pierced a way through the greenery. Indigo, being organic and renowned for its blue light-fast dye, is an important part of the textile tradition of Laos, literally weaving together nature and culture. Making indigo involves processes and ingredients that turn the dye blue or change it to black or mauve. These colour conversions are a magical process to Tai Lue weavers who often follow the animist religion. They strongly believe in ghosts, mystic energy and the 'phi' or spirits, with many complex rituals observed to keep them happy. One ceremony involves tying white cotton to the wrists of the guest of honour. Tai Lue women wrap frayed white cotton around their indigo pots to attract male spirits as they believe the dye will not be effective otherwise. The Hmong tribe traditionally put red chilli peppers around the indigo pot to ward off bad spirits.

We left the indigo grove and walked to a waterfall where a local family were having a picnic by a wood fire. I explored this scenic spot with its stunning jungle rock pools in more detail and was delighted to find the tiniest jewel-like scarlet feather sitting on a nearby rock. This kind of precious 'find' fills me with ridiculous delight. The thrill was somewhat dimmed, moments later, when I discovered more red

feathers – from the small robin-like bird that the locals had just barbecued!

Back home, I combined these layers of information and finds into a collage based on my experiences. I used materials that reflected some of the traditions I had learnt about on my trip. I layered pieces of painted tissue papers and watercolour scraps that reminded me of forest texture and colour. I used torn calico as a border, echoing the tradition of pleasing the spirits, and painted indigo pigment on some of it. Loose threads reminded me of the wrist-tying ceremony and I let these dangle, just as liana hangs from the jungle trees. The feather I had found was as red as a chilli pepper, so I thought this was a good compromise; it would ward off any evil spirits and was also a complementary accent of colour. I had bought some embroidery while away, which was packaged in recycled Laotian newsprint. I incorporated strips torn from this to echo the upright shapes of jungle plants. Finally, I embellished the collage with a sun and leaves, both hand-stitched and machine-sewn. The result felt meaningful – reflecting my immersion in the day and its layers of memory.

Indigo and Red *Collage using paper, paint, textiles and found materials*.

Making a reassembled paper surface

A surface can be made by collaging cut or torn pieces of plain paper together into an organic shape that echoes the landscape or other subject. I often have offcuts after cutting sheets of paper into smaller pieces. These can be reused, either for experimenting with colours or texture for later collages or to create a new reassembled surface. Wipe off any glue that squeezes out on to the painting surface to avoid it affecting subsequent paint application, particularly if you plan to use watercolour.

I used this kind of surface when I returned from the visit to Laos. The reassembled paper shape partly represented the path we had walked. Our trek curled through wild landscape, circled by mountains, down tracks fringed with feathery pampas grass, illuminated by the sun. I made notes, literally and mentally, to absorb what I could about this foreign environment as well as soaking in its visual delights. As the path was steep, our guide cut us bamboo sticks with his machete, chopping each stem to the correct length. Where his heavy knife fell on a half-buried root he showed us how it bled a scarlet juice. I rubbed some on a sketchpad where, like blood, it dried to a rusty brown. Continuing our walk, I noticed the earth change from yellow to terracotta and I collected samples from the path edge to use as pigment. I was pleased to hear that the indigenous people here use the forest and land for their natural resources but in a positive relationship with the ecosystem. I was mindful not to take too much precious earth from this foreign land and checked with the guide first. On my return home, I made paint with the foraged pigment (see here) and used it to depict the mountain track on my assembled surface of watercolour paper scraps.

Tom – The Track Less Travelled *Handmade watercolour using bought and found pigment on recycled paper scraps*.

Hawthorn on the Gorsy Hill *Handmade paint on true gesso with site materials including dried gorse thorns. Painted on a wood panel*.

Using site materials

Working with materials and tools sourced directly from the land is a much-needed partial return to the days when art was made with all-natural resources, such as plant, stone, feather and bone. Using art supplies found at the site where you are creating gives the work a palpable authenticity as well as being a sustainable art practice. Materials turn up wherever you find yourself, once you are tuned in to the possibilities, whether at the beach, woodland or mountain.

Even your garden can yield treasure. Examples of what you might find include: sand, earth, clay, mud, shells, bark, charcoal, dried vegetation, minerals, feathers and seeds. You can also use natural found objects as tools. For example, sticks, stalks and stones can often make their own mark or be used to apply or scrape through other materials. You can tie bunches of stalks together, using grass, to make a kind of impromptu brush, or use leaves to smear and wipe. Painting water can often be sourced from sea, river or puddle. Using site materials can add another layer of meaning to art, fostering a sharp awareness of surroundings. Imagination and curiosity is all that is needed to gather the rich array of mediums the Earth provides. The caveat to this is the necessity of collecting sensibly and not acting in a rustic equivalent of panic-buying!

With any kind of foraging, it is vital to take only what is appropriate to the situation, respecting the conservation of wild plants and the needs of the 'other-than-human'. Plants, seaweeds and fungi need to seed and propagate. It is illegal to pick rare plants so, if in doubt, leave well alone. Mineral and stone ought not to be chiselled out of cliffs or the ground – only gather bits, already loosened by natural forces. It is easy to trample and harm environments if gathering thoughtlessly. When away from home, collecting nature's 'souvenirs', be aware that you might be breaking local laws or even violating a sacred place. The idea is not to plunder but take small amounts and be prepared to go empty-handed where appropriate. There is a Countryside Code – foraging is a respectful conversation with the Earth. Materials harvested in this way are free, in monetary terms; but when nature fills our hands with gifts, we need to respond by being sensitive to its needs.

Direct work *en plein air* is central to the site-responsive practice of the artist Frances Hatch. She developed her

outdoor practice to involve the materials she finds around her in the landscape, especially the beach near her studio, collecting earth, rocks, minerals and litter.

Wild fruit juices, puddle mud and raindrops bespeckle sketchbooks. Armed simply with paper and a portable toolkit, Frances heads to the beach, often by moonlight, to create her response and attend to the particularity of each sensory experience of place.

Ravens Sipping Fresh Water at Castle Cove **by Frances Hatch** *True gesso and watercolour with Sandsfoot grit and clay on foraged wood. April 2020 (14 × 11 × 4cm).*

'Tools and pigments are gathered to become my palette of marks and mixtures; from these I reshape the materiality of the place in that very place. Each visit to an identical area

yields a different palette. The less "art kit" I carry, the more the landscape provides.'

– Frances Hatch

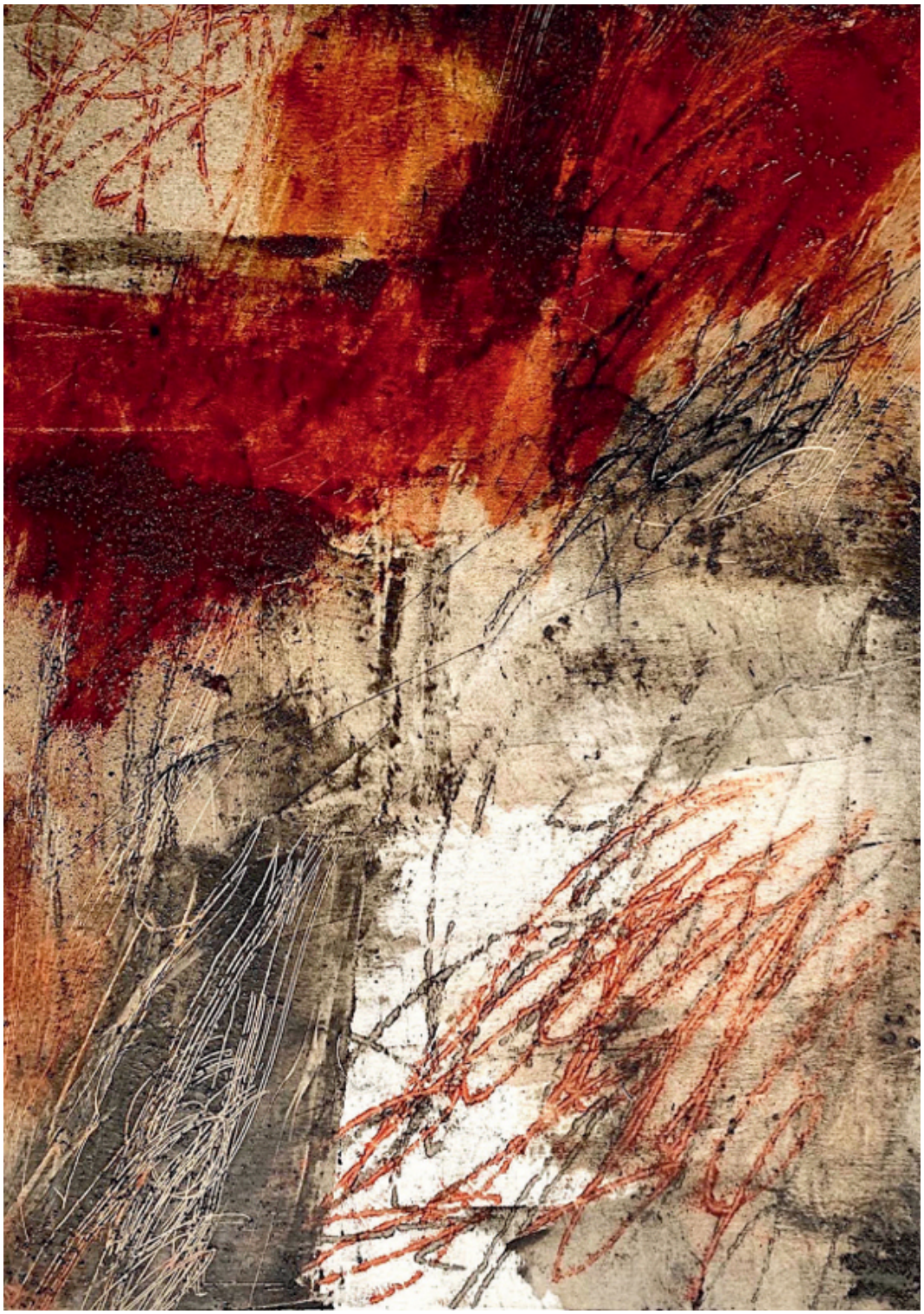
Willow First Thing, Portland Harbour, Dorset **by Frances Hatch** *True gesso and watercolour with site litter and beach debris on handmade cotton rag paper. April 2020 (16 × 22cm)*.

Mixing mediums and breaking boundaries

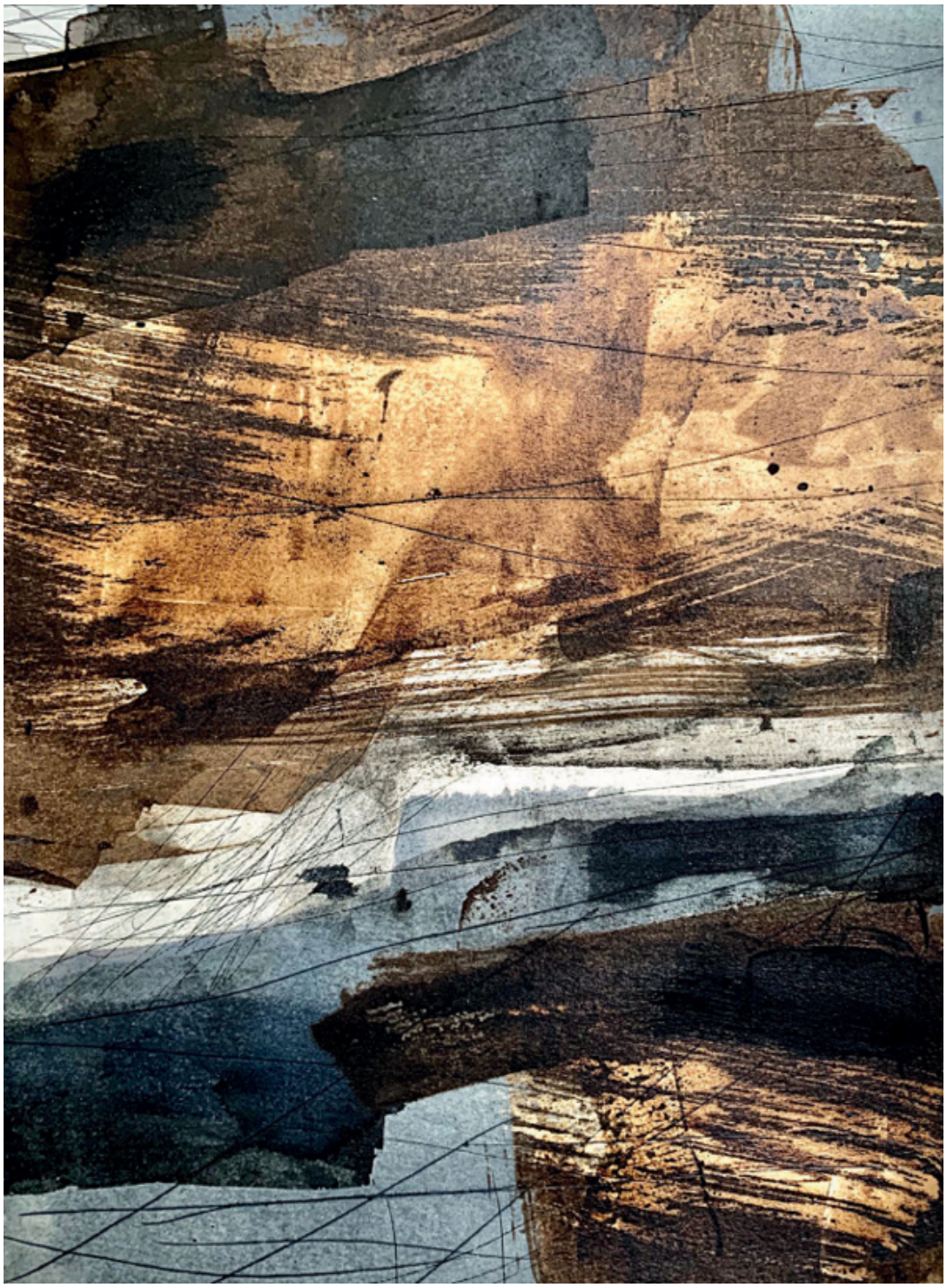
An exciting aspect of contemporary creativity is our freedom to break free of the traditional boundaries between mediums or genres. Why should we not paint into a print or vice versa? Why not stitch into a drawing? We can make our own rules and use conventional art materials if we choose or discover natural site materials *en plein air*. Alternatively, we can look in our shed and garage or even visit the local

recycling centre to discover unconventional resources for use on their own or in a multidisciplinary way.

Bina Shah is a contemporary artist who employs a close relationship with different mediums: cold wax painting, printmaking, ceramics, and often mixing materials and methods. She incorporates indigenous materials and local earth pigments and through a process of continual layering, etching, abrasion and deconstruction a surface is established. Bina is interested in breaking down the traditional representational 'view' by taking out the horizon to create a more abstracted vision; but she also sometimes juxtaposes traditional methods such as tempera and glair (see here) with more alternative materials such as bitumen. The resulting image is often ambiguous, challenging the perception of the viewer to find their own definition and narrative; or it may at times echo memories of a place to evoke an emotional response. On a residency in County Kerry, Ireland, she created a series of abstract paintings inspired by the barren beauty of this remote location perched on cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, battered by fierce winter storms. She made weather-related paintings using bitumen, slate dust, soot, peat ash, inks, tempera and graphite mixed together with water drawn from the natural springs and bogs. These told visual stories of time and place while capturing the atmosphere and textures of this rugged coastal landscape with its ever-changing magical light.



Bramble Hedge, Autumn IV **by Bina Shah** *Oil, cold wax, peat ash, marble dust, soot, mixed media on Arches oil paper (35 × 45 × 2cm)*.



Winter Storm on Bracken Fields III **by Bina Shah** *Tempera, glair, bitumen, ink, gum arabic, mixed media on Fabriano paper (35 × 43 × 3cm)*.

Handmade paper

In my quest for alternative art supplies, I have experimented with making paper. The commercial process of papermaking can be environmentally destructive, contributing to large-scale deforestation, air and water pollution. I want to eventually explore making paper with recycled paper waste and scraps but have made a start using materials from sustainable sources. Here, I am simply offering an introduction to a general idea and sharing where I have got to with my own explorations.

In basic terms, most papers from East to West are made by macerating plant fibres to make pulp. Simple papermaking involves dipping a screen stretched across a frame known as the 'mould and deckle' into a vat of the pulp. The aim is to cover the screen with an even layer, which is then transferred on to a cloth to dry. Traditional Japanese handmade papers are called '*washi*'. Kozo is one of the principal materials for making *washi* and is derived from a kind of mulberry tree. These are annually cut to ground level but regrow new long shoots every year, which makes it a very eco-friendly resource. A basic form of lace paper can be produced by splashing drops of water into the wet *washi* while it is still in the mould to create holes. *Washi* papers are mainly used for decorative purposes and in the context of this book I use them for collage or in combination with stitch and textile work.

The best watercolour papers are made from cotton rag so I also explored ways to make paper to potentially paint on using cotton linters. These contain partially beaten cotton, sourced from textile off-cuts and formed into dry sheets that resemble 'blotting paper'. Basically, you tear it up, soak it overnight in plenty of water and then blend with a food processor to make the paper pulp. My aim is to not necessarily replace my usual watercolour paper but to create a different kind of surface with new challenges.

If you do not want to make your own paper, an alternative ready-made source is Two Rivers (see here). This English papermill has a small team of craftsmen who use traditional techniques and tools to handmake papers from old rags. Their watercolour paper has a unique random surface texture unlike the mechanically even weave of most other branded papers and it is an incredibly forgiving surface. In South India, Khadi Papers (see here) handmake papers with interesting organic surfaces that are surface-sized to make them suitable for some watercolour techniques and other water-based mediums. They use a sustainable source of cotton from T-shirt offcuts, which are also used to produce the cotton linters for home papermaking.

My first papermaking experiments included paper made with either kozo or cotton rag. In some, I introduced lace, string or horsehair or added water to create the holes of lace paper.

Into the Unknown *I explored the idea of pressing fragments of existing paintings made on standard cotton rag paper into thick wet paper pulp. This facilitated the combination of watercolour methods within the new porous*

surface, which, being unsized, was unsuitable in itself for water-based techniques.

Adding ingredients to handmade paper

Pigments can be added to pulp to create coloured papers. The fun bit is that these pigments can be sourced from stones and rocks picked up in various parts of the country. I had access to chalk, clay, mudstone, Purbeck stone and red sandstone. Wearing a mask to avoid inhaling the powder, I used a fine cheese grater to grate the foraged materials into a powder to add to the paper pulp. The fine pigment coloured the pulp evenly and bigger flakes added flecks of texture (see the samples opposite). To achieve a greater range of colours you could also add dry pigments from an art supplier (see here).

The handmade papermaking process lets you laminate sheets together while still wet and sandwich materials in between or add them to the pulp. I had noticed the correlations between paper and plant forms such as birch bark, which is composed of subtly coloured layers that peel, tear and curl into fantastical organic shapes. This made me want to investigate the idea of laminated paper layers, unusual shapes and sizes with interesting edges.

If you want to be really inventive, you can add seeds to paper to make it plantable. For example, you could use poppy or foxglove seeds in the pulp and incorporate appropriate imagery on top. It would be satisfying to think that one day the artwork might revert back to nature and grow, for the cycle to start all over again! I have even seen an artist using well-rotted garden compost in their paper or include ashes from Yule and Beltane fires to make special sacred papers. You can embed all kinds of plant material, but be aware that their colour can bleed through. Even so,

the options are endlessly exciting and there is even the potential for moving towards three-dimensional works.

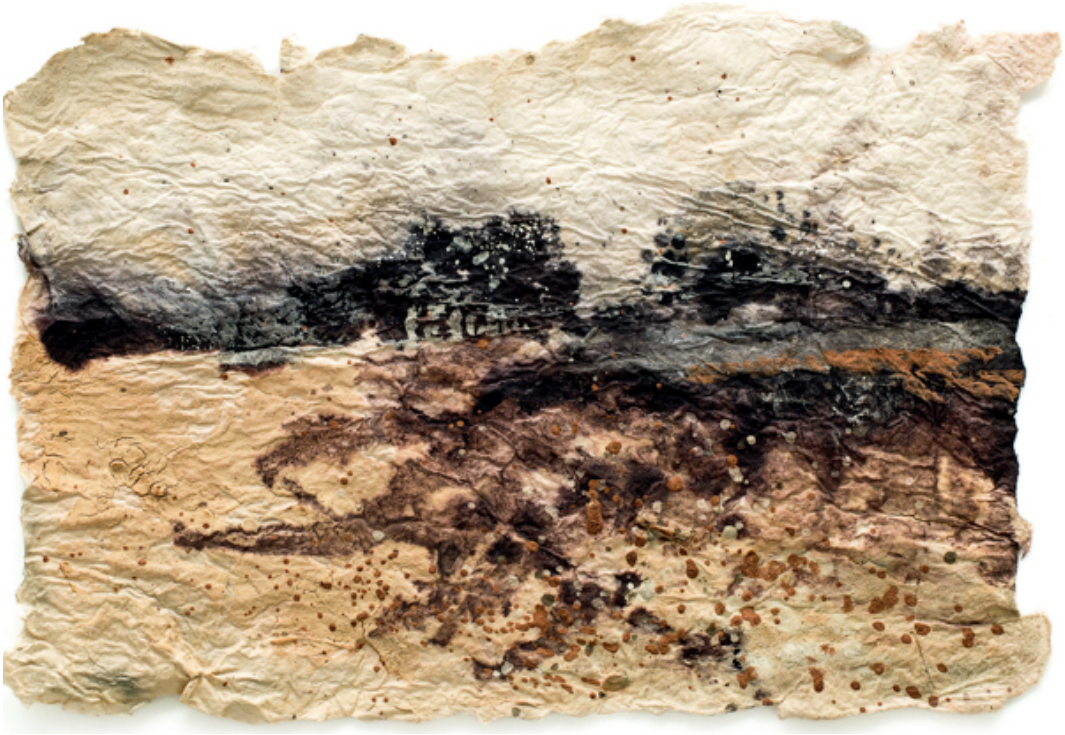
Papers *These papers were made with cotton linters, coloured with pigment ground from foraged materials. Paper can be pressed to make it flat while still damp but I prefer to leave mine wavy and natural*.

Painting on handmade paper

My first experiments with handmade paper were 'unsized' so I assumed that they were unsuitable for painting on. This kind of untreated paper is called 'waterleaf' paper and acts like blotting paper, soaking up liquid. 'Size' is a material added to paper that can add strength and flexibility but also retards absorbency and prevents subsequent additions of paint or ink from bleeding. There are, of course, ready-made products you can buy to add to the pulp. Clear gesso can be painted on to size-dry paper but if you are steering away from plastics, gelatine is an alternative. A basic

method is to dissolve half a teaspoon of gelatine into a cup of warm water, brush it over the surface and hang up to dry. Gelatine is derived from animals, so another traditional surface size to explore is vegetable starch. Early papermakers used starch from potato, rice or wheat.

Paper Landscape 2 *This cotton-based paper included ground-up mudstone to tint it to a warm grey. Oak gall and walnut inks were painted on top. It is interesting how the ink sometimes splits on paper to create separate tones. The pale sky was added with ink made from chalk and I sprinkled a fine grating of mudstone into this while it was still damp and sticky*.



Paper Landscape 1 *I ground up a mixture of chalk and limestone to add to cotton rag pulp. It made a wonderfully crumpled piece of paper, reminiscent of animal hide or tree bark. Walnut ink and oak gall ink were applied to the wet paper with the addition of paint made from a yellow sandstone (see here).*

In my first experiments, I did none of the above! Sometimes being a beginner is incredibly freeing. You are unaware of rules so you just try things out with freedom. Inspired by the idea of using natural pigment to tint the pulp itself, I decided to just 'go for it' and began pouring and trickling inks and paints made from the earth on to some of the unsized ragged, crumpled sheets. It was a little difficult to control the paint flow but I was thrilled to find that although some of the liquid pigment did absorb into the paper to create 'washes', the thicker, creamier 'paint' stayed on top to unexpectedly exciting effect.

Making paint from foraged materials

Most contemporary artists are far removed from the process of actually making their own paint or tools. Making art from nature is a massive leap from using manufactured supplies, returning us to the essence of the Earth itself. The physical function of the activity correlates with an inner, more ancient way of being. It harkens back to a world where a prehistoric people used organic and mineral-based pigments to make marks on cave walls; to pre-Renaissance art and to bushcraft; to a world where materials came out of the earth and could eventually return to it. Taking soil, and using it as an art material, transforms it into a magical medium that can be used in a relevant, contemporary as well as spiritual way to create narratives of time, place and memory. Clays, ochres and earths provide a kaleidoscope of colours, and wherever you live, there is a natural colour palette. I love to walk in the countryside, foraging for the studio, using nature as an apothecary to extract colour and create further beauty in a healthy way.

Getting paint from a stone can be a little like getting water from one! Some are too hard to use without proper equipment, so I only use soft, sedimentary stones and earths. If you can draw a mark with a rock, it is a good indication that it will be easy to use without requiring a hammer. I roughly grate stones before transferring to a mortar and pestle for further grinding. The finer the powder, the more effective the flow of the paint will be. Do use a face mask when grinding or pounding to avoid inhaling dust. There is a method that involves suspending particles in water to separate it from organic matter. Frankly, I am too impatient to do this. I find that a sieve to get rid of impurities is adequate and the unrefined pigment, mixed with gum arabic at a ratio of about 1:1, serves my purpose. Gum arabic is available as a ready-made liquid or in crystals for dissolving in water. The mixed paint can be diluted to a thin wash or left thick, like gouache. For an option that goes

halfway to being natural, you can mix pigments with a branded glazing or pouring medium. This will be waterproof when dry.

Materials used for paint-making from nature. Soft rocks and stones gathered for pigment. Shells were traditionally used as containers for watercolour and are useful as a mini palette. I found these large fresh-water mussel shells on the banks of a local lake.

Duck Pond *Sketch using pigment made from earth materials with pieces of collaged duck-egg shell, using PVA glue*.

Making paint with raw bought pigment

In our modern, largely urban age, you may not have access to natural materials such as rocks. However, you can buy raw pigments in every imaginable colour and still make your own paint. As with found pigments, these need to be combined with a binder like gum arabic or the pigment will not stick to the surface. There is a mystique that surrounds the idea of making your own watercolour. I was told by a reliable source that I would be very disappointed with the result if I failed to lengthily grind the ingredients with a glass muller on a slab. It is true that to make a paint that exactly resembles manufactured watercolour with its flow,

translucency and versatility takes practise and physical effort, but an old accident to my hand makes this activity difficult for me. I thought I would see what would happen if I jumped straight in to adding pigments to gum arabic and water like I did with my foraged earth pigments, with very little grinding. Guess what? I made paint. The way I use it means that it is more akin to opaque gouache than translucent watercolour. It is perhaps sometimes a little grainy with less ‘flow’ than traditional watercolour, but the colours are very rich and vibrant. I have only used it on small surfaces so far, so will be making further experiments. Some pigments mix readily with water, while others resist, but eventually give in if you persist. Wearing a mask, as pigments can be toxic, I use an old brush to firmly and very thoroughly stir until every last bit of powder has turned to a creamy consistency that can be diluted to suit your requirements. Honey is often added to aid the flow of watercolour, so I sometimes include some, donated by our own generous bees.

If you are happier using ready-made paint, you could refine your palette with fewer colours. If you buy colours made from a single pigment paint, you can invent and mix your own combinations. Buying ‘special’ ones that have been mixed for you from variations of the same basic pigments leads to a bewildering array of choice. If you cut down, it is better for your purse, which means less stress and pressure to perform.

Gorse *Handmade paint on true gesso with dried gorse inclusions*.

Do You Like Butter? *True gesso on board, butter wrapper collage and egg tempera*.

Ancient recipes and methods

Having made some basic water-based paints, I was keen to look at ancient recipes and methods that include other natural ingredients. Modern materials are easy to use and, like convenience foods, easy to prepare. Some traditional methods are time-consuming and are quite a precise science with regard to ingredient proportions and method, so they have to be regarded with a different mindset. Some artists might find the ritual of preparations lengthy and frustrating, while for others it is a stimulating and life-enhancing part of the process.

Egg tempera is made by mixing fresh egg yolk with dry pigment, water and gum arabic. The ratio is something you have to experiment with – this is just a simplified guide. First you have to separate the yolk from the white, pierce the sac that the yolk is contained in and catch the yellow substance. The yellow does not seem to affect the paint colour. This paint can dry out quickly, so you do have to work accordingly, using thin layers to avoid cracking. The result is a water-resistant, non-flexible, vibrant paint with a slight sheen.

Egg white can be used to make **glair**. You make this by whisking egg white into a froth, leaving it overnight and saving the liquid that gathers underneath. As before, you mix this with dry pigment to make paint, possibly adding water as needed. Some pigments absorb more glair than others to create a usable consistency – again it is a process of trial and error. It was a method used to paint medieval manuscripts, but can be taken forward and used to create very contemporary artwork (see here). Glair can also be used on its own to size paper or paint over gouache to add a protective satin finish.

The traditional surface for tempera is **gesso** on a wooden board. You can also use gesso underneath other paints to

give artwork a different appearance and feel. True gesso is an unusual, silky and creamy surface to work on and a very different product to manufactured plastic gesso. Traditionally, you apply warm rabbit-skin glue first and, when this has dried, apply layers of a mixture of the glue mixed carefully with whiting. Titanium white pigment can be added to whiten the mixture. It is a delightful surface to work on but can be temperamental to make; cracking, for example if overheated or applied incorrectly. It is not flexible, like acrylic gesso, so is ideally applied to a firm surface, although I have used it on small pieces of very thick paper.

Buttercup Field *Egg tempera on paper*.

Field Hedgerow *Handmade paint on true gesso with site materials*.

Making homemade ink from nature

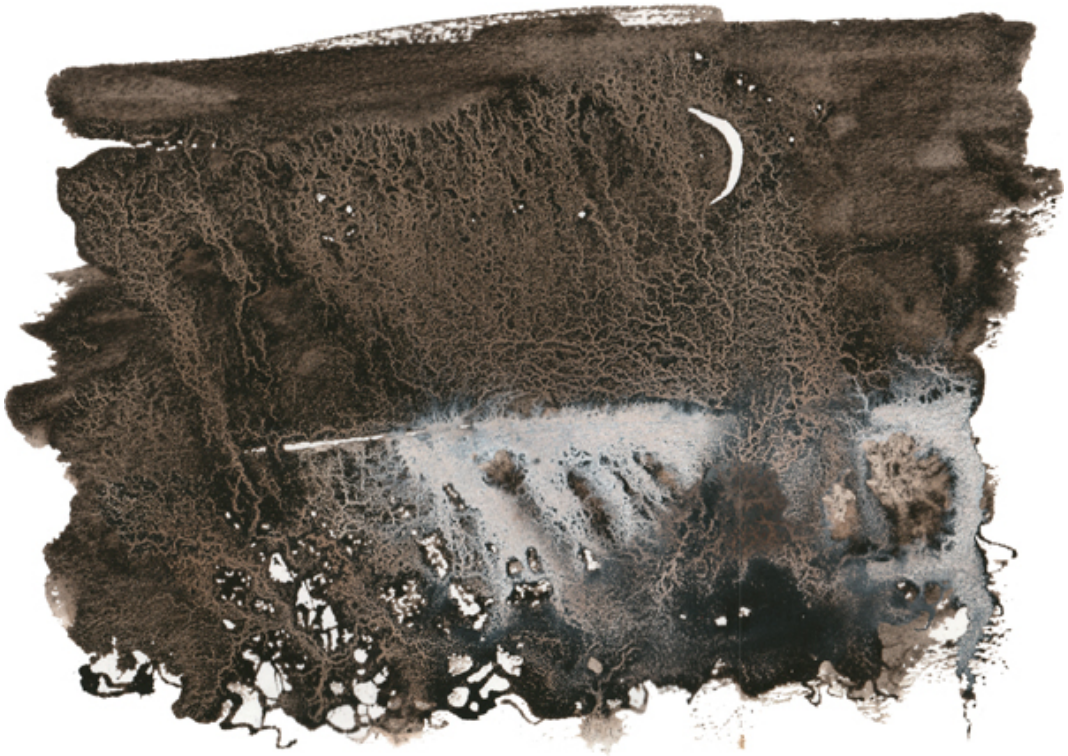
Ink is a unique material due to its ancient history of being used to create both words and pictures. Making homemade ink is easy, cost-effective and addictive. Early inks were made from elements such as charred bones, which is probably a bit too organic for most of us. Luckily, you can make ink out of virtually anything: weeds, flowers, nuts, berries, fungi, bark, leaves, burnt wood, soot, ash, minerals and metals. You can let your imagination run riot – a

forager's dream. A fun place to start experimenting is in the kitchen, using familiar ingredients such as turmeric, cinnamon, onion skins, beetroot, red cabbage and blueberries. Simply boil ingredients in a pan of water, evaporate the juice until it is concentrated, then strain it. Once cooled, you can add a binder to help the ink's longevity and add viscosity to help it flow. Gum arabic is the sap from the acacia tree and is a useful binder for both inks and paint. It is hard to provide a precise recipe for making inks as it is trial and error. For example, if the ink is too thin or weak it might need more colour-rich material, further condensing, more binder and so on. More advanced ink-making techniques play with acidity levels to shift or intensify colour. The addition of vinegar, baking soda or wine, copper scraps or iron oxide in the form of rusty nails, creates magical alchemy. Fantastical reactions can be achieved by the chemistry at work.

Inks made from vegetables and other plants are not necessarily archival. They can fade or change, but the process is fascinating and useful for sketchbook work and creating a connection with the subject. For displaying such artwork, there is special picture-framing glass that blocks the main culprit, UV light. There are also fixatives with UV filters, including a milk-based casein fixative, 'Spectrafix', which is made from a recipe used by Degas over a century ago. It depends on how religious you are about staying natural and how important permanence is to you. The potentially ephemeral nature of some inks and acceptance of possible change could be viewed as an interesting aspect of the artwork's lifecycle, reflecting nature itself. It is strange that in our throwaway culture we still think that our creations should last forever. I tend to agree with the artist Alice Fox, who comments on attitudes to archival materials in her book *Natural Processes in Textile Art*: 'We are celebrating serendipity. The results of your experiments

won’t necessarily stay the same over time. Natural objects, colours and marks will continue to change, as will we.’

Samples of homemade ink: 1 Charcoal, 2 Blackthorn, 3 Walnut, 4 Oak gall. See here for further details.



Moonlight Magic *This ink was made from shaggy inkcaps gathered at Halloween. I added opaque chalk ink, which was created by combining finely ground chalk with water and gum arabic in equal quantities. Arguably this is paint rather than ink. The crescent moon is just the white of the paper*.

Brown and black inks

I have concentrated on simple methods for making inks in shades of black and brown, from oak galls, charcoal, walnuts and shaggy inkcap mushrooms. The final part of the lifecycle of this particular mushroom is to melt back into the ground, turning into a glorious black slime that can be used as ink. It is wondrously easy to make. Each autumn, the shaggy inkcaps grow in the grass verges of a country lane near my studio and I gather a small percentage of the mushrooms into a container and simply wait. Within a couple of days, they start to turn into an unctuous, inky, rather smelly liquid and within a week they have dissolved completely. The addition of a whole clove can detract from

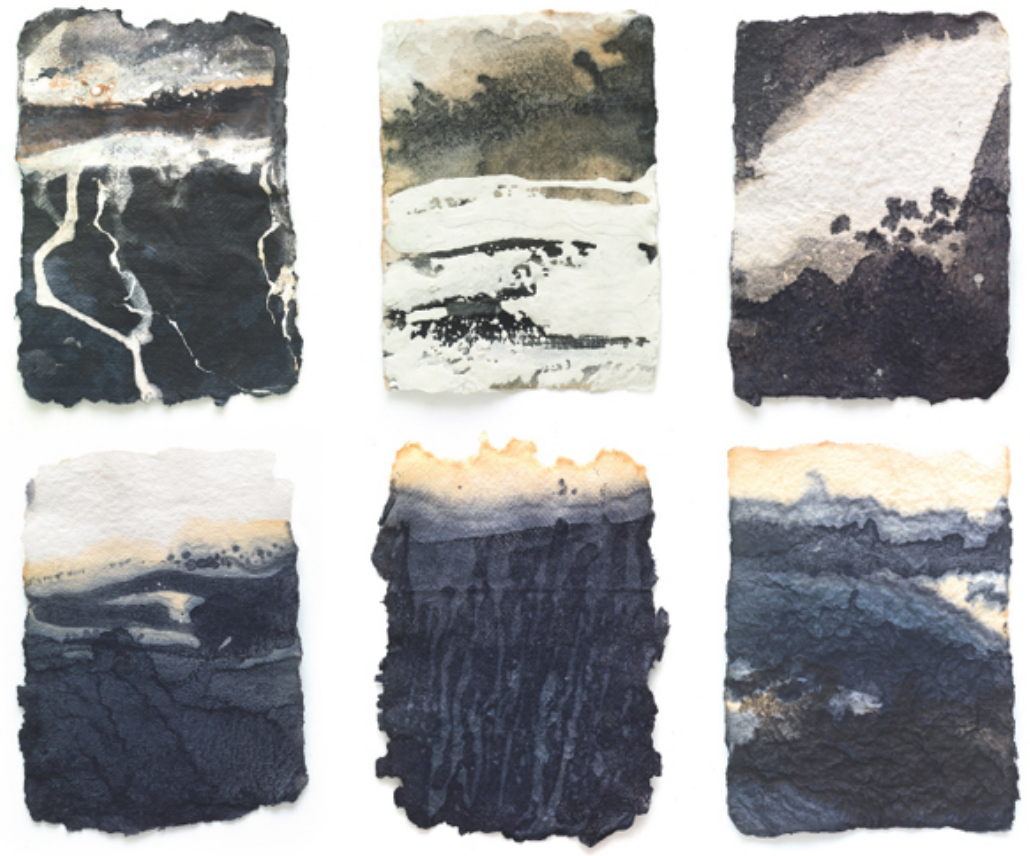
the pungent odour and also prevent it from going mouldy. I leave the container outdoors to evaporate and thicken. When brushed on watercolour paper, I find that it can granulate into amazing textures, although it varies each time. If you have weaker ink, you can still build up dark tones through layering.

Walnut ink involves boiling walnut husks in water for several hours, straining, cooling and adding gum arabic when cool. Charcoal ink is made by very finely grinding up some black, burnt wood from a bonfire and adding rainwater with a little gum arabic. Oak gall ink is created out of the gall nuts on oak trees. They can be crushed in a coffee grinder and soaked in water to soften (you can also buy oak gall powder). Simmer the grindings or powder in a pan of water for about 45 minutes without boiling and strain. At this stage the liquid will be a grey or brown colour. Add some ferrous sulphate and stir to dissolve, or just add rusty nails and simmer for another 10 minutes or until it is reduced down. The iron content darkens the ink and when it is used on paper the darkening process continues. Iron gall ink can be corrosive on paper but many surviving ancient manuscripts and drawings by Leonardo da Vinci were made with it. An occult book called *The Book of Magical Charms* was also written in oak gall ink in the seventeenth century and is still in good condition. Whether that is due to witchery or science I cannot say!

Painting with inks

I tried out a range of homemade inks to make landscapes on small bits of organic paper that I had made. Some of the tonal markings in the ink were due to how it pooled and settled into the textures of the rough paper. Inks included were walnut, charcoal and chalk. I also used oak gall with

and without ferrous sulphate. Because the paper was not sized, the ink often went through from front to back so that there were images to choose from on both sides. The damp newspaper, which I had placed underneath for protection, crinkled and made unique marks on the pigment that had bled through. The ink on the newspaper itself was reprinted with the homemade ink and the results were little *wabi sabi* artworks (see here) in themselves. I found these elements of surprise and serendipity as immensely rewarding as the small experiments had been.



Rust as a medium

There is beauty in imperfection and you can find this in the weathered surface of rusty metal, just as in other natural surfaces. Incredible textures can be made using rust as a

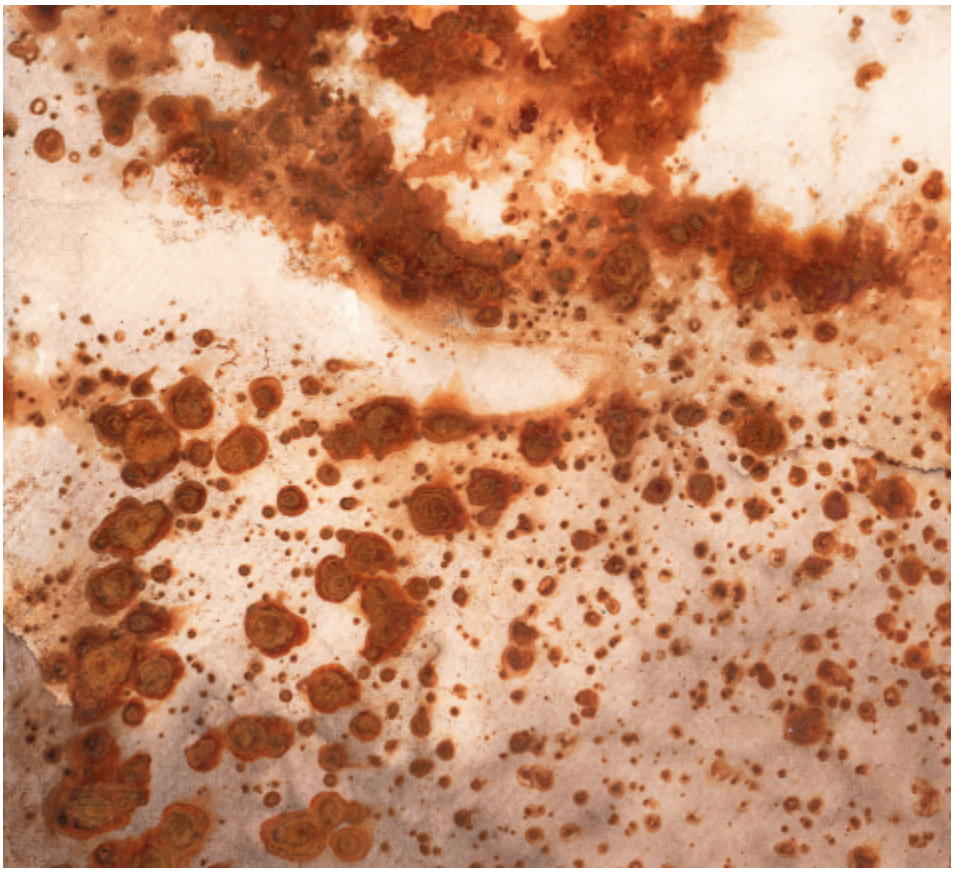
catalyst on fabric and paper. I have only applied this process to papers. Do read the words of WARNING before you begin (see box, below). Making rusted paper should be done without expectations, as the result is dependent on several factors including the amount of rust, heat and humidity, added ingredients, and the paper or fabric used. Even if you replicate everything, as it is a natural process, the results will vary next time – but that is part of its charm. Natural rust is an iron oxide and comes in different colours depending on its origin. The printed colour is also affected by which liquid you choose to set the process in action. Different teas, vinegar or red wine can be used. Water is the safest option but quite slow.

Most people begin by placing rusty, flat-bottomed items on a surface, wetting everything with the chosen liquid and covering it with recycled plastic or tissue paper to retain moisture. Timing varies, but tea and vinegar took about 24 hours to work their magic in my experiments. I was pleased at first with my rust print of a tiny donkey shoe that I picked up from the ground at a Moroccan market. I also made prints from some tools and keys I had rescued from a skip opposite my studio. However, I did not know how I could use the results. Could they form part of a conceptual record or could I include them in a collage? With these questions unanswered, but with rust on my mind, I soon spotted a flat sheet of battered rusty metal on a friend's scrap pile, which he was happy to get rid of. A rusted baking tray could be used to similar effect. I placed paper on top of this metal surface and wet it as before with tea or vinegar until the paper developed rusty abstract textures. The results were more relevant to my work than just a printed shape of an object. The patterns are unpredictable but exciting. I made rust prints on different kinds of paper and worked into them, using them as background or for

collage work. Some looked like landscapes already, without any further help from me.

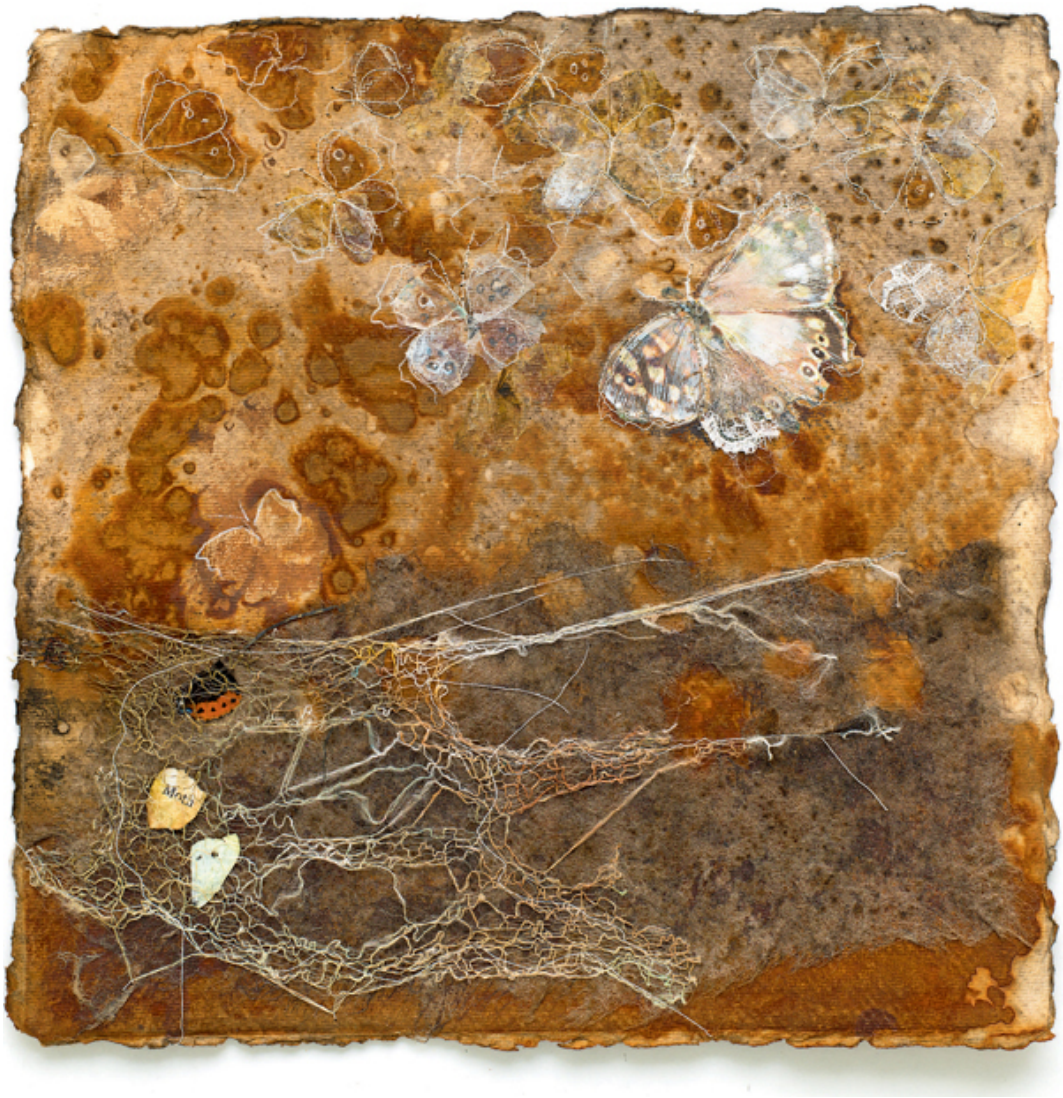
WARNING

Be aware that too much contact with raw iron can make some people very ill. Tolerance varies with each person. You should handle rusty metal with caution and keep it away from children. Do not eat, drink or rub your eyes when handling it, and wear gloves, mask and safety goggles. Do not use an iron to dry or smooth rusted paper, because it will cause the iron to rust. Rusted paper seems to be fairly stable. I have not noticed changes in my samples; but as a natural process they may do so with time.



Rust Marks *This is the first stage of a rust-printed khadi paper without further work. Where vinegar was applied, it created rust-coloured patterns and tea turned parts of the paper to a warm grey tone*.

Rust Seascape *The markings that developed on this Khadi paper were very sensitive and delicate. They suggested a seascape to me and I collaged scraps of other rusted papers on top to develop this idea. The foreground patterns hint at rocks or reflections but are deliberately left abstracted to keep them open to interpretation*.



Of Moth and Cobweb *The mottled markings on this rusted paper resembled the pattern of a moth's wing. I collaged a painted moth on to the base and sewed around it. I stitched loose outlines of further fluttering pale moths. In the bottom section, I attached torn net-like fabric that reminded me of a spider's web. Finally, I trapped pieces of butterfly wings found on my windowsill within this web with a scrap of wing-shaped paper printed with the word 'moth'*.

Burnt Gorse – Exmoor *I layered strips of different rust-printed papers over a base of rusted Khadi paper to create a textured landscape. Then I stitched on the threads of some black frayed fabric that had blown into a gorse bush. It suggested the burnt silhouettes of winter gorse that I have seen while walking through the moors. I was cautious with the machine stitching as I had read that rust can blunt needles*.

Rewilding your creativity

‘All good things are wild and free.’

– Henry David Thoreau

In order to fully connect with nature in the so-called developed Western world, we need to think about how we can rewild not just the land, but ourselves. Rewilding means a reversal of the programming that we have become susceptible to, largely through the messages, both blatant and subliminal, of advertising, television and social media: the messages that we must own or do certain things to be content and look, behave or – in our case – create in a particular way. We need to question our brainwashed thinking that everything needs to be perfect. Wildness can be chaotic, untidy and imperfect – but is also energizing, liberating and edgy. Wildness can be a state of mind that connects with what Dylan Thomas described as ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’.

We perceive the idea of wilderness, wild animals and wildflowers as positive, but if we ourselves behave wildly or break with convention we can be considered to be rude or eccentric. From childhood, we are taught to obey rules and encouraged to paint within the lines. Art in most schools is regarded as peripheral. It rarely takes place outside the classroom and children are told to be tidy, rather than encouraged to free their inhibitions and question rules. A creative thought might lead to anarchy, and it is easier if everyone is herded to conform.

I often feel like an outsider, out of kilter with the modern world. I don’t want to wear Lycra when I ride my bike and I don’t own an iPad. It is not that I want to wind back the

clock, but we can learn from the days when to be wild meant knowing how to look after ourselves, when weeds were valued as medicine, food, dye and craft material rather than being tidied up, mowed or eradicated with weed-killer. In these turbulent times, we need to look to more ancient sensibilities and listen to the land; create a new mythology based on the wisdom of our ancestors, when all our senses were fully awake and our imagination was vibrantly engaged.

To be wild is to be playful, but it seems we seldom cast aside self-imposed, sanitized restrictions unless we are on holiday. When we visit the beach, for example, the primeval instinct to become closer to the elements is profound. We paddle, splash and swim. Still, in some wilder places we are able to build small fires and cook ‘in the elements’. We are drawn to make our mark in the sand, to sculpt it into castles, draw, write and decorate with bits of driftwood or shells. We are conscious of our footprints and the sand beneath our feet. A way to stimulate creativity is to transfer similar elemental responses into thoughts for art-making. To be creative, we need to unleash ourselves from the inner cages that trap us. Then we can wake up to make life a wild adventure where we listen to dreams and keep eyes, ears, mind and doors open to all that is possible and impossible.

The Wild Wood **(detail)** *Watercolour textured with craft tissue paper*.

Back to the wild

When I was seven, I lived under a rhododendron bush in ‘The Wood’. I wrote songs to sing to the birds while standing

on my throne of logs with pockets full of petals for rubies. At the wood entrance, there was a sign pinned to a tree that said, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. I was not clear what this meant, but knew that if I was caught, something terrifying would happen. The delicious temptation for adventure was too great and I was drawn to the scariest corners of the wood; especially The Pond. This was evil-smelling; full of dank green slime, jelly-like bubbles and wriggling creatures that I now know to be frog spawn and tadpoles. Precarious slippery stepping-stones led to a dark, rocky, shell-encrusted cave called The Grotto. The fern-festooned walls dripped and echoed and Wild Things lived amongst the blackness at the back. Towards the faraway end of the wood, there was an island surrounded by a river where willow trees grew. Their long boughs looped into sinuous shapes that wove fantastical bowers to hide in.

The wood was generous. In spring, it offered scented daffodils for me to wrap in grass ribbons for Mother's Day. In the autumn, we gathered sticks for our annual bonfire party when we feasted on toffee, waved sparklers, smelt the acrid smoke of the fire and burnt our fingers while roasting potatoes in the embers. We climbed high trees and fell into patches of stinging nettles. When it rained, I made mud pies; when the sun shone, I made perfume from velvet rose petals. In the 'black and white' winter days, I needed hat and gloves; the nights were darker and the days colder.

It was a time when I used all my senses, was allowed to run wild, take risks and be in touch with nature, the seasons and the elements – earth, fire, air and water. I felt free to give voice to the mythic imagination that is a fifth element. I spend my adult life continuing to capture the essence of these nostalgic, healthy, halcyon days using my hands and heart to craft new stories of the wild and elemental, using natural materials.

A small piece of the shimmering rock found in the Himalayan mountains was ground to make paint.

Rhododendron Forest *Memories of my childhood rhododendron den inspired a visit to the Himalayan foothills to see forests of rhododendron trees, whose flowers turn paler the higher they grow. One magical misty morning, we trekked over a rocky outcrop that shimmered like mother-of-pearl. I collected a few bits of the loose mica and made paint with it. Some is included in this picture*.

Druid's Wood *In this ancient oak woodland on Dartmoor there are stones with strange markings reputedly made by druids. Moss reportedly never grows within these drawn shapes. The trees are festooned with lichen and tiny ferns. On a blustery walk through the wood, tiny pieces of lichen had fallen to the ground. Some lichens grow less than 1mm a year, so I was careful to gather only a few fallen pieces and used these to print unique textures and patterns within my paint*.

'I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were games of intricate enchantment and deception.'

– Vladimir Nabokov

Magic and imagination

I am not suggesting that we renounce all our modern values to live the life of a child or Thomas Hardy's Woodlanders. It is a question of balance. Historical perspective and nostalgia tend to make us look back at an idealized world of Edens and idylls, Utopian 'Golden Ages' and 'The good old days'. These may or may not be myths, but stories are an

important part of culture. We need folklore and magic as an antidote to our modern world of science and technology. Allegory and imagination are essential for our social and psychological health as we face an uncertain future. Artists can cultivate and help to re-create more grounded earthly magic, redirect the flow of the mainstream current; breathe a new kind of air; feel the fire in our hearts again. It is what the poet Alice Oswald describes as 'putting our inner worlds in contact with the outer world – a deep, slow process that used to be the remit of the rake'.

Our relationship to the natural world can be revised through creativity. Coleridge, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, for example, created fantasies that transcend reality and presented new interpretations of nature. When we view the world through the eyes of fantasy and imagination it stops our brains getting lethargic. The wildness of our imagination can create in ways that juxtapose both observed and dreamt realities of nature with the ephemeral and the ornamental. It can all mingle in a relationship between the accidental and the intentional to help re-engage us with the enchantment that is still to be found.

Serendipity

On unproductive work days it can feel like the world has lost its magic. Towards the end of one of those uninspired, crazy days, I decided to go out with some cartridge paper and a chunk of graphite in order to take rubbings of what I vaguely thought of as 'nature things'. I trudged along the puddled path and peered gloomily at the mud and modern fence posts, feeling unenthusiastic. I thought I might collect some hogweed skeletons later and do the rubbings back in my puddle-free studio. With this in mind, I continued round a sharp bend and was astonished to be confronted by an

enormous, pale-orange full moon, hanging in a flat grey sky. I remembered that this was the first lunar eclipse of the year; the January Wolf Moon, so named by both Europeans and Native Americans because of the lupine howling that haunted the midwinter. (In each month the full moon has a different nickname, mostly based on some kind of seasonal activity.)

All thoughts of mark-making were dropped, and I followed this alluring moon. I felt that it would get closer if I walked far enough, but, of course, it was tantalizingly elusive, slipping behind branches, disappearing behind the woodland or hill. It was a game of hide and seek in darkening twilight. A shower of small birds swept across the golden disc in a joyful flurry. I was reaching for my pen to scribble notes when I looked up to see the long, slim silhouette of a fox quietly slinking through the shadowy meadow, its tail brushing the ground. Not quite a wolf, but the fox made a good substitute! A pale-gold blush now surrounded the moon, and the soft sepia darkness was infused with the scents of damp earth. Under the moonlight, glimpsed through a dark and tangled briar hedge, I felt I had stepped through an otherworldly portal into a fairy-tale or folklore legend. Magic is never far away.

It is good to start with an idea but it can pay to be flexible and open to serendipity. I did not do any of my planned nature frottage that evening but had been gifted a new focus. I resolved to follow each moon as it made its appearance throughout the year and create painting stories each month based on these immersions.

Fox Moon *Ink, pigment and leftover gold paint*.

Crescent Moon *As a former illustrator, I am at heart a visual storyteller. I like to encourage the viewer to weave their own path through abstract earthy forms and dig for secret delights buried amongst compositions that allude more deeply to issues of conservation. I have established and explored an eclectic and elastic visual vocabulary, using imagination as a wild and fertile land where creativity flourishes in an unfettered way*.

Synchronicity

When senses become dulled by the everyday routine of life, dreams can get overlooked. We make do with a conventional sense of abundance and live an existence from a diminished, material perspective. We yearn to move in a particular direction and sense we are not living to our full potential. The artist's block I experienced before writing this book dissolved when I metaphorically submerged in

nature’s elemental wild waters. My creativity rose from the fire like a phoenix. It took root from the earth and spread its seeds through the air. Each time I had a new idea, I found it echo and ripple around me wherever I moved. The kind of meaningful strange alignments and repetitions that Jung called synchronicity were carrying messages to me, the way dreams do. They seemed to provide guidance about what path I should follow or decision I should make.

Sometimes you think about or wish for something and then it happens or appears. It is easy to dismiss these happenings as coincidence, and if the incident does not especially interest you and make you take note, that is all it is. However, if you are drawn to and amazed by it, something is telling you that you are on the right path. This may be your subconscious, but I like to think that it is the universe nodding in agreement. This game of chance may seem no more than that – but these synchronistic moments are revealing your inner thoughts and highlighting your deepest interests. We are fast losing touch with our unbridled, natural ability to tune in and follow primeval gut feelings and intuition; unlike animals with their seemingly telepathic, psychic powers. Synchronicity is considered pseudoscientific by some but a profound part of the spirit world by others. Some cultures believe there is a fifth element that describes that which is beyond the material world. This fifth element is sometimes thought of as the ether or spirit. I call it the imagination, and believe it to be a large part of what helps to make us creative beings.

Connecting with the elements

Nature is a rather general term meaning a wealth of different things. When we talk about the elements it is clearer what we mean. They are the bit of nature that we

actually experience – see, feel, smell, taste, hear. We can relate to the elemental in an intuitive and physical way. However, our urban segregation from nature is preventing us from doing this. Many of us live in sealed, air-conditioned or heated houses that separate us from the elements. The calendar year has become bland and homogenized, with an artificial sense of the seasons and cycles of the moon. Many of us are out of tune with the physicality of the elements. It might seem disrespectful to say so when the world so frequently experiences extreme weather that claims human lives: hurricanes, tsunamis, wildfires, floods, heat waves, tornados. However, we have shrivelled into ourselves as if we are separate from what we perceive as external elements – when in fact we are actually composed of them ourselves. Our bodies are around 60 per cent water. We return to ash and earth. We have fire in our blood. It is no coincidence that our language is peppered with elemental references such as 'playing with fire', 'sailing close to the wind', 'getting into hot water', 'treading on thin ice'. These idioms all imply that danger is a bad thing, and we have put up barriers to block any risks. For hunter-gatherers, risk was part of the hunt. The adrenaline rush we used to get from being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger or spearing a woolly mammoth has been replaced today with alcohol and chocolate!

I am suggesting that we take on a bit of risk in our creative lives and pay homage to a different, rather more unfamiliar sensibility in which the elements animate our thought and action and give another slant to our interpretation of and relationship with the natural world. Some of these ideas are, of course, potentially dangerous. I am not necessarily suggesting that you *literally* play with fire, but that you take metaphorical scary leaps in the way you develop your creativity. I have used experiments for these final pages; not simply for the sake of a new technique or gimmick, but

as a visceral, physical immersion in nature and the elements based on underlying conceptual thinking.

Pink Supermoon *Ink and handmade paint with collaged, printed craft tissue paper*.

'Now I see the secret of the making of the best person: it is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.'

– *Walt Whitman, 'Poem of the Road'*, Leaves of Grass

Down to earth

January can be a colourless time of year when the Earth seems second-hand and drab, with grey skies over brown fields and trees. Real frosty, wintry weather is exciting, but this year it was endless rain, fog and mud. I decided to dismiss negative thoughts and see what positive discoveries I could make on an unpromising day. I would go on my usual local nature trek and challenge that mud to be glorious and interesting! I collected samples from the

patchwork of fields to explore their different nuances of colour. I remembered the names of neutral shades on wall paint charts – ‘ammonite’, ‘skimming stone’, ‘mole’s breath, ‘bone’ and ‘furrow’ – and decided to take a similar romantic view. My creative antennae began to grow more alert as I realized there was potential after all in ‘boring brown’. I set off with a small trowel (actually an old spoon), some pots for samples and a notebook.

My first stop was a grassy field covered with molehills. I scooped some crumbly soil from a cake-like heap and began to label it ‘earth from molehill’. Then I decided to be more specific; it was the thirtieth and biggest molehill in a sweeping crescent of mounds. I noticed that other fields were also punctuated with molehill patterns and it made me wonder about what was happening under my feet. Was there an enormous Cappadocian Underworld of mole-filled tunnels? Labyrinthine subterranean communication systems, complete with mole palaces and cathedrals? Perhaps inhabited by Mole Kings and Queens dressed in crow-black velvet robes? As I sat in the middle of a damp field, lost in childish daydreams, I was glad that no one was passing by to see. But I realized that it did not matter what anyone thought. I was re-stimulated and alive, connected and grounded – ready to write poems, dance in the dew – and I was only on field number one!

Leaf print made using wet mud from a puddle on a leaf.

Making Mountains Out of Molehills *The perforated holes at the edge of my spiral-bound notebook, with some collaged, paper-punched additions, were used to represent 30 molehills – but only the complete holes count. There is a legend about a local Neolithic stone circle that each time you count the stones the number will mysteriously change. The same is true of my symbolic molehill holes!*

I continued my walk to gather further samples from each field that I passed (see next page). Then, back at the studio, I wrote down my childish thoughts about the underground world of royal moles and printed it out in suitably aristocratic 'palace script' font. I smeared molehill earth over this, and stuck on an earthy paper sample, drawn into using a dried hogweed stalk while outdoors. I

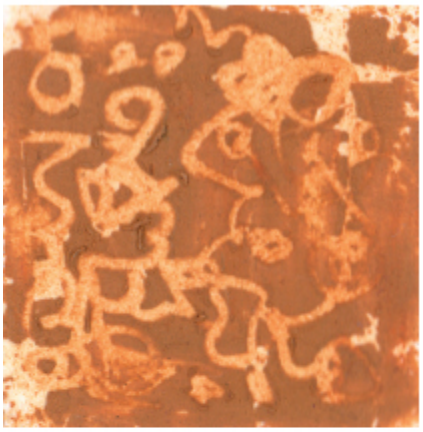
painted a rosehip I had seen on the walk on a piece of dried teabag – naturally, the one I had used for tea on my return home. The red added an important accent of colour.

Field notes

On my January walk, collecting earth samples, I became engrossed in the poetic possibilities that a seemingly dull day actually had to offer. I had started on a muddy journey but soon found myself looking closely at all kinds of detail. At the ford across the river, I was struck by the palpable ancient feeling of place that emanates where people have walked, congregated or travelled through for millennia. Today, some mud glistened in fantastical metallic colours – perhaps oil from a vehicle – not natural but a part of its present history and a comment on reality. I scooped up some of this iridescence for my collection. Soon afterwards, I found a torn, detailed map of the very walk I was recording, discarded in a hedge. Such serendipity was a clear pointer as to how my day's work might develop.

Back in the studio, I used all the samples that I had collected and applied them to paper scraps. I was intrigued by their variations in colour, tone and texture; from dry and crumbly to dense and greasy, with some that readily flocculated on the paper. I added gum arabic or glue to the earthy paint to make sure it adhered. I collaged each piece into a patchwork landscape to represent the different fields where each sample had been taken and used pieces of the local found map as a background (shown opposite).

1



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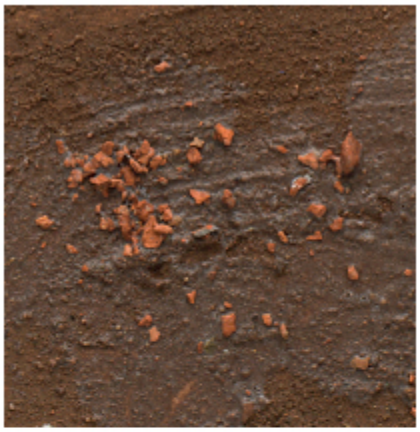

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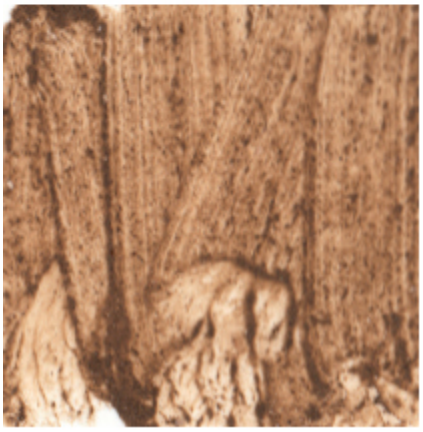


4

Local mud palette: 1. Clay from the lane by the woods where the rooks gather at dusk. Rubbed on with a damp leaf and scratched with a feather quill; 2. Brick-coloured fragments and earth from the entrance to a rabbit burrow; 3. Oily mud from the edge of the ford across the river; 4. Fresh earth from a molehill rubbed on with wet grass.

Gloucestershire Mud Map *Mud, earth, brick, clay and recycled map on paper*.

Playing with fire

I had subscribed to the idea that the *process* of art-making is at least as important to my sense of well-being as the finished product itself. In conceptual art, the focus of a work shifts from the created object to the fulfilment of an idea. I wanted to tiptoe further into this territory with my small experiments to explore the elements. I have always enjoyed having a bonfire and I decided to explore it as a primeval

medium capable of reshaping paper, employing this destructive element in a constructive and creative way. I was interested in the act of making a performance: something that was not just about the pleasing result, but the immersive experience of smell, heat, sound and taste, and the hypnotic colour of the flames. I have always felt that my nature paintings have an underlying message, but this felt like taking a step further into the realms of environmental art.

No Smoke Without Fire *Collage of burnt drawing and handmade paper*.

We Are Playing With Fire *Singed and smoked plastic and paper on burnt wood salvaged from the bonfire*.

I had a 'dress rehearsal' in a corner of my garden, holding paper gingerly by its corner, with the edge over a candle flame. I watched it scorch and waited for the flicker as it set alight. The ragged edges blackened then glowed bright before they ignited and a charcoal bloom spread into the paper – devouring it, slowly first, then rapidly flowering into flames. I sprayed the fire with water to dampen its enthusiasm then let another length of paper edge take its turn. Again, the fire bit chunks from the crumbling edges, leaving blackened teeth marks. The paper metamorphosed, changing shape before my smoke-stung eyes. My audience, the blackbird, watched suspiciously from a safe distance with its beady, coal-bright eyes. A pheasant echoed the

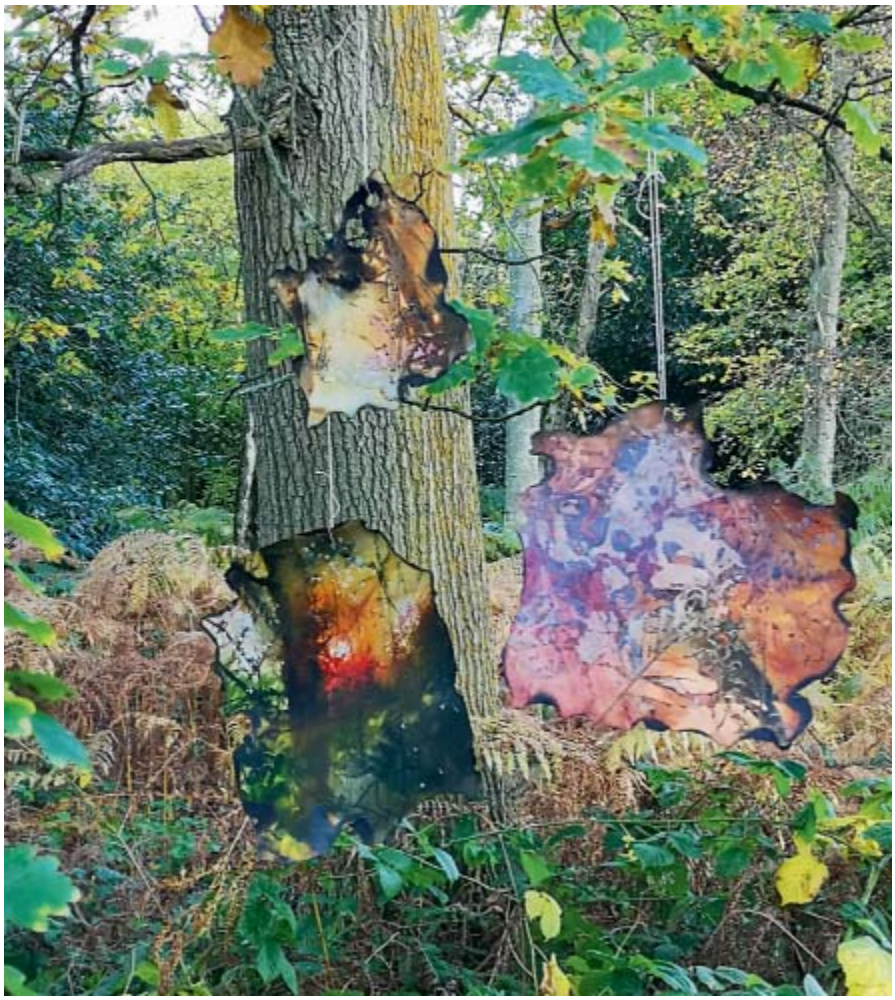
crackle of the small garden bonfire and the pigeons clattered their wings in the hedge as if to help fan the flames. I was excited with the results but also thought how useful the exercise could be as a way of processing emotional rubbish: writing down on paper the old wounds and negative thoughts that stop you moving forward, then burning these words in a ceremonial fire, at midnight if you like, to celebrate new beginnings.

Igniting creative flames

Burning artwork can be therapeutic in a cleansing way, but I wanted to push this idea further through another ‘performance’ – using the fire as a new medium with which to visually change an image, rather than destroy it. My husband helps a friend to manage his private woodland that has a dedicated space for a bonfire. I went there with paper, artwork and matches. I had painted a tree in this wood previously and had some watercolour monoprints made using fallen leaves gathered from underneath it (see next page). It was like offering the work back to the wood. I also took some of my handmade paper, as I had discovered from the first session in the garden that this delicate surface burnt more readily than thicker watercolour paper. I carefully burnt the edges of the paintings over the log fire and just loved the smouldering, black-edged results. The following day, I collected some of the ash and burnt wood from the cold fire to make inks and used the charcoaled pieces to draw into the reshaped artworks. I hung them from the tree branches and filmed them twirling in the wind; it was a celebration of nature and the elements made on the earth floor, out of fire, with water to control it, and air to whisper through its messages. The hangings reminded me of Tibetan prayer flags, which are hung up to be blown by the wind and spread goodwill into the all-

pervading space we share. It was a ritual, my offering, prayer and message; nature can inspire creativity and in return we need to cherish and respect nature.

Setting Sun in the Burnt Tree *in the process of being burnt*.



Burnt offerings hanging from a branch in the oak tree that inspired the artwork.

The fragile layers of the white handmade paper with its holes and charred edges echo the flaking, black-marked bark of the birch tree it is hanging from.

Setting Sun in the Burnt Oak Tree *Burnt watercolour, oak gall ink and charcoal*.

Woodland Carpet Remnant *Burnt and smoked monoprint made from fallen oak leaves*.

Work in progress with a water spray bottle nearby to extinguish flames as necessary.

The burnt edges of the painting echo the scalloped shapes of the oak leaves used to create its textures.

Woodland Homage *Twice-burnt watercolour using burnt sienna and burnt umber*.

The lines and marks within this abstract piece are reminiscent of leaf veins and the holes echo those in the decaying oak leaves.

Burnt artwork suspended amongst twigs and ferns like an ashy fragment blown through the air from the bonfire.

Conclusion

I began this creative nature odyssey from a dark and frightening starting point. I have dug my way forward through labyrinthine tunnels and earthy caves. This book has been a departure from previous ones, but I took a deep breath and leapt from high cliffs into deep, unknown waters. It has been a rumination, a deliberation on the value of small but focused moments – a concentrated attention on what has become, for me, this enchanted bit of Now. I have savoured each eclectic, painted, stitched or rusted mark; each tangled branch or creviced rock, each ripple in the pond and bird wing in the sky. Through the alchemy of a mindful approach, unearthed debris has become treasure. Perhaps I will lay some of my new findings to rest; perhaps I will continue to explore some discoveries further. How exciting it is to have new creative options.

Burnt Sun *Landscape collage made from painted, rusted and burnt papers*.

Throughout these chapters I have talked about my personal quest, but even as I write these words it has always been with a view to encouraging you to have similar wild-creaturely thoughts; to move towards your own dreams and seek a new way of art-making with nature at its heart. Through my own experiences I have spoken of how an immersion in nature helps energize creativity and how vital it is that we express these creative thoughts in practical ways that are in harmony with the Earth. I have held out my hands to possibilities, to other artists, to life and to you. This book is not only about art – it is about living an Earth-born, holistic and contented life, as naturally as possible. The immersion in nature has truly helped me and I hope that you will join me in this way forward.

Rusted Moon *Landscape collage made from rust prints on various papers*.

Resources

The following websites are suggestions (not recommendations) that you may find useful for further information or supplies.

www.woodlandtrust.org.uk
Responsible foraging guidelines.

www.gov.uk/goverment/publications/the-countryside-code
The countryside code issued by Natural England has guidelines and rules to help you respect, protect and enjoy the countryside.

www.goldenpaints.com
Golden Paints, one of the leading producers of artists' paint, has a list of useful tips on their website. It includes storage ideas to ensure materials stay usable, tips for cleaning tools, and instructions for acrylic disposal.

www.falkiners.com
Papers and art supplies.

www.artvango.co.uk
Interesting art and craft supplies and workshops.

www.workshopontheweb.com
An online magazine for textile artists.

www.textilearts.net
Art suppliers and information.

www.westdean.org.uk
Workshops and courses.

www.earthpigments.com
The Earth Pigments are a US-based company. Their website includes a shop and information about paint and product-making.

www.naturalpigments.com
Shop and information on traditional methods.

www.georgeweil.com
Art materials including paper-making supplies.

www.cornelissen.com
Pigments and materials. Paint recipes and information. Online and London shop.

www.paperslurry.com
Papermaking information.

www.janeponsfordstudio.com
Papermaker and workshops.

www.tworiverspaper.com
Rag papers from a historic papermill.

www.khadi.com
Handmade papers and paper-making materials.

Featured artists

Ann Blockley www.annblockley.com

John Blockley www.johnblockley.com

Emma Buckmaster and Janet French
www.buckmasterfrench.com

Alice Fox www.alicefox.co.uk

Frances Hatch www.franceshatch.co.uk

Cas Holmes www.casholmes.wordpress.com

Bina Shah www.binashah.co.uk

Karen Stamper www.karenstampercollage.com

The Arborealists www.arborealists.com

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The following books, poems and articles inspired and informed me in the writing of this book.

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Snowdonia *Gouache on slate scavenged from a quarry near Snowdon, Wales*.

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HEALTH AND SAFETY

Some of the activities and materials discussed in this book may be potentially dangerous and should be approached at your own risk. Natural materials are not necessarily harmless. Mineral pigments and earth colours may contain toxic or hazardous components. A mask and gloves should be worn when grinding or using these and other dusty materials such ash. If in doubt, stay safe.

Take all necessary precautions if you are going to work with fire. Keep an extinguisher or bucket of water close by for emergencies and a small water spray to stay in control of the process. Be aware of hot candle wax dripping from a candle on to clothes and burning fingers. Some paints are particularly flammable and may give off noxious fumes. The paintings on here were made using watercolour only. Double-check that any kind of fire is completely dampened and put out before leaving. Any activity is at your own personal risk.

COUNTRYSIDE CODE

Common sense should be applied to foraging from nature. Respect and care is needed to avoid depletion and damage to the eco system. Tread mindfully when gathering materials and minerals. Only gather when specimens and materials are abundant and easy to access. Even then, never forage more than ten percent of it. Use scissors or a knife to cut specimens to avoid damage and do not uproot plants. Do not pick plants on nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Be prepared to go home empty-handed.